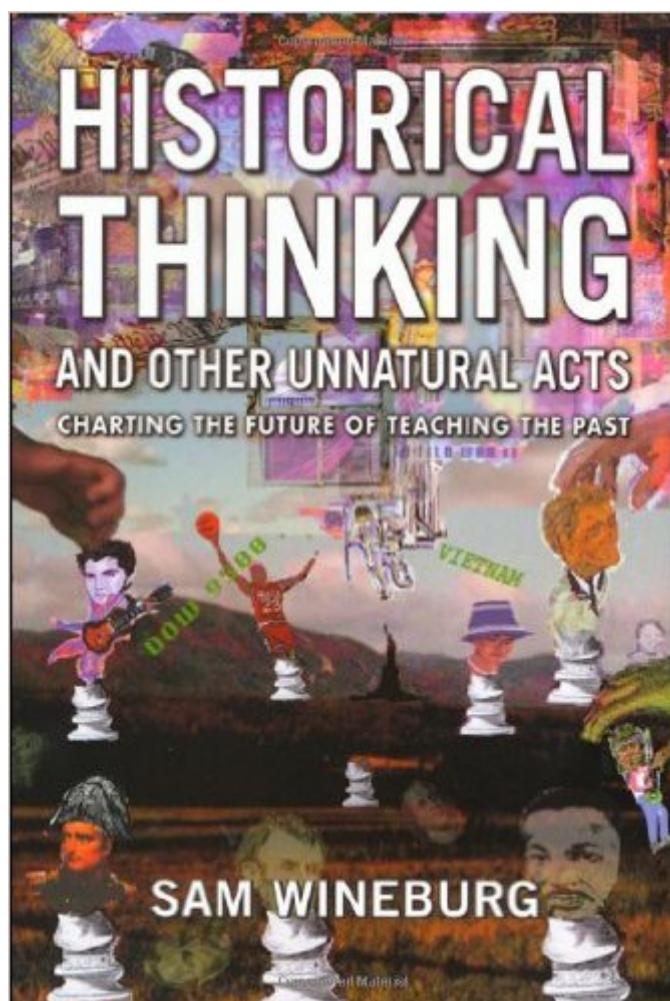


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Historical Thinking And Other Unnatural Acts: Charting The Future Of Teaching The Past (Critical Perspectives On The Past)



Synopsis

Since ancient times, the pundits have lamented young people's lack of historical knowledge and warned that ignorance of the past surely condemns humanity to repeating its mistakes. In the contemporary United States, this dire outlook drives a contentious debate about what key events, nations, and people are essential for history students. Sam Wineburg says that we are asking the wrong questions. This book demolishes the conventional notion that there is one true history and one best way to teach it. Although most of us think of history - and learn it - as a conglomeration of facts, dates, and key figures, for professional historians it is a way of knowing, a method for developing an understanding about the relationships of peoples and events in the past. A cognitive psychologist, Wineburg has been engaged in studying what is intrinsic to historical thinking, how it might be taught, and why most students still adhere to the one damned thing after another concept of history. Whether he is comparing how students and historians interpret documentary evidence or analyzing children's drawings, Wineburg's essays offer rough maps of how ordinary people think about the past and use it to

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Customer Reviews

Taped to the door of Sam Wineburg's office at the University of Washington's College of Education are paired photos of dogs and their comically similar owners. Professor Wineburg greeted me with a pop quiz: "Which twins look most alike?" Behind this playful question is an educational psychologist's interest in how people think, especially about history. Wineburg's "Historical Thinking and Other

"Unnatural Acts" (Temple U. Press, 255 pages, [price]) shows that historical thought is not a natural process: it "goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think, one of the reasons why it is much easier to learn names, dates, and stories than it is to [understand] the past." Wineburg told me his interest in this subject first awoke when he took a history class he couldn't ace with his good memory. He learned that histories aren't objective summaries of the facts but interpretations and arguments made out of information that's always incomplete. "But how did historians do that?" Wineburg asked. "Their books seemed like products of naturally systematic thought--which wasn't how my mind worked, but maybe I was just dumb!" Wineburg's research into history and the mind has won many honors during his 12 years at the University of Washington. Through having students and professors think aloud while reading documents, he found that only novices just read something and decide what it means. "A historian's thought process is full of hunches and reverses, constant self-questionings and I-don't-knows," Wineburg explained. Standardized history tests inhibit this kind of thinking, besides guaranteeing that students will seem vastly ignorant. "Periodically, starting with the first national survey in 1917, Americans have concluded from factual tests that kids don't know history.

For a book that is 15 years old, this has aged quite well. Sam Wineburg has expanded upon his original ideas and now has a major education project going at Stanford University. Right now he is working on the ways that studying history can assist in reading comprehension with his Reading Like a Historian program as part of the Stanford History Education Group. I like this book because Wineburg was one of the first to challenge the older methods of history education. Since the publication of this book many teachers have begun to change their pedagogical philosophy. Unfortunately that is not the case for most college professors because they are still relying upon lecture to inform students. The book is practically a must read for anyone who wants to teach history at any level. He explains why the study of history is important. It really is. Just watch the current presidential election and the mangling of history going on by all candidates, some more so than others. It is evident that history education has not seen many gains in a century and that has a lot to do with the way it is taught. Wineburg addresses the challenges students and teachers face in learning about history and how to confront the challenges and overcome them. The final chapter cover history as national memory which is an entire field in its own right. I really enjoyed reading the book and use pieces as quotes for my own teaching. Students in my classes find out on the first day that this is not about the memorization of facts, but rather learning why things happened and what their effect on us today is. Thanks to Wineburg, I get their attention and then plant the seeds of

inquiry which leads to some interesting discussions later in the semester.

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