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## Learning from the Past: Individual Experience and Re-Enactment

David Thelen\*

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*Speaking before the Indiana Association of Historians in spring 2001, historian David Thelen called for a new approach to historical research and education. The IMH recently asked Thelen to elaborate on those remarks; his response follows. The IMH also invited three educators and museum professionals to share their thoughts on the essay and its relation to the work of bringing history to public audiences. Participants in this web-based conversation, a transcript of which follows Thelen's essay, included: Lonnie Bunch, president, Chicago Historical Society; Timothy Crumrin, associate director for research, Conner Prairie; and William Munn, an IMH editorial board member and high school history teacher in Marion.*

History poses a profoundly troubling paradox in American culture. On the one hand, there has never been greater popular interest in history—expressed in genealogy, reunions, museums, films. On the other, academic historians lament shrinking audiences for their scholarship, and surveys report that Americans do not recognize people or events from American history. In our book, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (1998), Roy Rosenzweig and I used survey research to try to map popular uses and understandings of the past. Our results led us to a similarly exciting and paradoxical conclusion: Americans use the past actively and critically to live their lives, but they feel disconnected from and distrustful toward “history” where they usually encounter it, in school.<sup>1</sup>

In this article I want to propose how by reconfiguring our understanding of history around individual experience and re-enactment we can develop a fresh perspective for connecting professional, civic, pedagogic, and personal practices of history-making. Such a perspective can provide starting places for widening the discipline of history to better fulfill its potential to help students understand themselves, frame and make choices in life, learn from and empathize with others, think critically, and become active, autonomous citizens.

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\*David Thelen is professor of history at Indiana University, Bloomington.

<sup>1</sup>Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York, 1998).

I will suggest how history classrooms, which many Americans experience as alienating, could become places for learning lifetime skills. With such an approach the dramatic change in the content of history over the past generation, which has included an increasing concern for the lives of people once overlooked by historians, might be better matched by a comparable broadening in history's core disciplinary practice.

Before going further I want to acknowledge that I use the term "re-enactment" with reluctance, because for many historians it conjures up images of escapist amateurs playing soldier. I use it, however, because it describes a wide variety of practices in contemporary life. Indeed, the exciting (and difficult) part of exploring re-enactment is that practices built around re-enactment—from Alcoholics Anonymous to movements for reparations for slavery or personal apologies for things a person regrets, from Civil War re-enactments to religious conversion, psychotherapy, and restorative justice—have developed in such isolation from each other that practitioners in one arena have rarely recognized terrain they share with those in another. "Individual experience" is a thorny term for many, too, and I use it because it is the most commonsensical term people use as they go about life (and talk with interviewers about how they use the past). And at a time when Americans find institutions generally unresponsive, many people turn to total immersion in experience—"the experience economy" or "experiential learning"—to transform commerce, civics, and education into more familiar terms.<sup>2</sup>

### **Challenges of History Education**

In thinking about how to broaden history to help people use it more actively and naturally, I want to begin with what many people have found most troubling about their school experiences. For the past century the sources of alienation people report about history classes have changed very little over time or place. Students lament that history education usually centers on an "alienated body of facts" that some mysterious authority has collected and arranged chronologically and then expected students to memorize for exams. A National Education Association committee complained as early as 1916 that "the traditional history course has given to the child a mass of facts, chronologically arranged, because in the judgment of the adult, these facts may sometime be useful, or for the purposes of that vague thing, 'general culture.'" And a survey of 32,000 students in twenty-seven European countries in the 1990s disclosed that the learning of facts was the highest priority of their history classes. What was worse, in

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<sup>2</sup>Joseph H. Pine and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* (Boston, 1999).

1917 as in 1987, surveys showed that American students had failed to “learn” the facts history was supposed to teach.<sup>3</sup>

The second major complaint was that history centered on an “official” narrative, most commonly of acts organized around the fate of the nation-state: its birth, its tribulations, its acquisition of territory, institutions, and values. History provided the “official” story that young citizens were supposed to learn about their collective identity.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Thomas C. Holt has observed that the greatest problem with historical narratives “is not that these narratives are necessarily inaccurate, but simply that they are closed, stunted versions” and thereby “misrepresent the dynamism” people experienced in the past while they “shut down the learning process at the very place it might begin.” More broadly, as many theorists have noted, narrative structure was designed to corral what people experience as sprawling and open-ended.<sup>5</sup>

Our interviews with hundreds of Americans confirmed that the most formidable barrier Americans experience in using history in schools is that they come upon it as something completed and finished—subject to argument and changing interpretation to be sure, but still over. Many people find this a barrier because they have learned that, in order to use the past in their daily lives, they must reinhabit the open-endedness they experienced when they originally went through an experience. By making experiences open-ended, we make them arenas of choice at the time, and later of taking responsibility. Carl Jung urged people to excavate their experiences so they could turn what had been frozen in time into moments of choice for which they could then take responsibility. The process of using the past becomes one not of trying to corral its open-endedness but of trying to pry it open wider and keep it open, to experience our uses not as finished products but as ongoing inquiries. Such a process is already central to many institutional and cultural practices that help people become more creative and responsible users of the past. Many people we interviewed looked to the past to try to figure out where they had come from and were heading, what they wanted to pass on to others before they died, how to find and hold onto other people, and above

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<sup>3</sup>Murray R. Nelson, ed., *The Social Studies in Secondary Education: A Reprint of the Seminal 1916 Report with Annotations and Commentaries* (Bloomington, 1994); Magne Vagvik and Bodo von Borries, *Youth and History* (2 vols., Hamburg, Germany, 1997), I; Sam Wineburg, “Making Historical Sense,” in Wineburg, Peter N. Stearns and Peter Seixas, eds., *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives* (New York, 2000), 306-307.

<sup>4</sup>Two perceptive frameworks for what makes history narratives “official” are Michael Frisch, “American History and the Structures of Collective Memory: A Modest Exercise in Empirical Iconography,” *Journal of American History*, LXXV (March 1989), 1130-55, and James V. Wertsch, *Mind as Action* (New York, 1998).

<sup>5</sup>Thomas C. Holt, *Thinking Historically: Narrative, Imagination and Understanding* (New York, 1990), 17. For an example of the purposeful design of narrative structure see Donald P. Spence, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1982).

all how to make a difference in and take responsibility for their lives and those of others.<sup>6</sup> The basic challenge to history education is to imagine how students could engage history in the same open-ended ways that they use as they confront the past in their everyday lives.

### Rethinking Individual Experience and Agency in History

Before we can develop a plan for a history education that proceeds from the open-endedness of human experiences we need to step back and look at the heavy burden that the discipline carries from its origins. Hayden White has observed that the founding understandings that go into creating a cultural tool (such as the study of history) continue to inhibit its uses thereafter: "Every discipline . . . is . . . constrained by what it *forbids* its practitioners to do . . . . Every discipline is made up of a set of restrictions on thought and imagination, and none is more hedged about with taboos than professional historiography."<sup>7</sup>

The first modern historians established a framework in the early nineteenth century that continues to constrain how historians see individuals and their experiences. In place of the Enlightenment's quest for timeless and universal patterns of thinking and acting, these historians posited irreducible social or historical masses, driven by collective emotions and traditions, which shaped institutions, cultures, and especially nation-states. They maintained that those new nation-states, cultures, and collectivities should shape the identities, compel the loyalties, and fulfill the aspirations of individuals. This vision looks strange in retrospect because the founding historians were submerging individuals into collectivities at the very moment when novelists and biographers were discovering and releasing individuality from collective constraints, often putting individuals into conflict with their surrounding cultures. At this very moment that Ralph Waldo Emerson called "the age of the first person singular," historians made nation-states, cultures and institutions the real agents and actors in history. Instead of looking at how individuals experienced their movement through time, the first historians thought the larger "Zeitgeist" of surrounding time and place was the thing to be explained. They froze individuals into interchangeable and largely invisible pieces set into motion by larger things historians called "historical perspective" and "historical context." Many post-modern theorists have further extended this dismissal of individual experience as random, shallow, private, and even self-deceptive by insisting that the broad "discourse" of a particular time and place shapes what individuals mean by what they say and do. Indeed,

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<sup>6</sup>Rosenzweig and Thelen, *Presence of the Past*, especially chapter 2.

<sup>7</sup>Hayden V. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), 126.

concludes Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, “the modern individual subject . . . vanishes into the discursive condition.”<sup>8</sup>

To shift our starting point from collectivities to individuals, we need to replace the starting assumption that individuals are shaped by circumstances and institutions with a question: How do individuals use cultures and institutions as “tools,” to use James Wertsch’s term, to frame and solve problems, to be able to see and do more, to gather resources and make a difference? Or, to invert this perspective, we could start with the classic formulation of the problem posed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Individuals make their own histories but they do it under circumstances only partly of their own making. We would next add Jean-Paul Sartre’s observation that while time, place, and circumstance may indeed frame the choices which individuals experience and which determine their lives, those larger circumstances are not facts of nature. Individuals experience, name, construct, and frame choices differently in response to the same circumstances. To Sartre’s modification I would add one more: Individuals construct from time, place, and circumstance not determinants of their behavior but horizons of possibility and constraint, including relationships, pressures, and conventions from which they frame choices and take responsibility for them. They create these horizons not as isolated beings or interchangeable members of cultures or institutions but, as Norbert Elias observed, in elastic, variable, and changeable face-to-face relationships with other individuals.<sup>9</sup>

While group leaders might draw circles around poles of collective identity to try to keep a group’s members from straying and strangers from entering, many individuals describe living their lives “betwixt and between” poles. Many Americans inhabit borderlands along seemingly contested divisions between African and American, Republican and Democrat, gay and straight. Individuals choose among potential allegiances to locate themselves. A woman might identify with her experiences as a woman, lawyer, Democrat, Chicagoan, lesbian, Polish-American, twenty-something, Catholic, college graduate, human being. To describe any one of these groups would be to fall far short of describing the multi-faceted individual. “[A] man has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose

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<sup>8</sup>David Thelen, “Making History and Making the United States,” *Journal of American Studies*, XXXII (December 1998), 373-97; Friedrich Meinecke, *Historicism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, trans. J. E. Anderson (1959; New York, 1972); Carl E. Schorske, *Thinking with History: Explorations in the Passage to Modernism* (Princeton, N.J., 1998), 219-32; Emerson’s journal entry for January 30, 1827, in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. William H. Gilman and Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 70; Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, “Agency in the Discursive Condition,” *History and Theory*, XL (December 2001), 51.

<sup>9</sup>Wertsch, *Mind as Action*, chapter 3; Norbert Elias, *The Society of Individuals* (Oxford, England, 1991); Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism and Humanism” (1945), in Stephen Priest, ed., *Jean-Paul Sartre: Basic Writings* (London, 2001 ed.), 25-27.

opinion he cares," William James explained. Early twentieth-century sociologists like Charles H. Cooley and George Herbert Mead described how individuals construct and play various social roles, in various social circumstances, to explore which ones fit most comfortably. Later, Robert Jay Lifton described how individuals try on different identities and roles as they seek to balance a need for coherence as an individual with a desire to explore their many sides.<sup>10</sup> We can experience each of these roles to explore another piece of our individuality even while we try to retain our coherence as individuals.

As they explore their individuality, people negotiate their cultures' constructions of appropriate and inappropriate individual behavior. Individuality may have emerged with the Renaissance, as Jacob Burckhardt believed. A positive sense of the modern self may have first appeared in the mid-nineteenth century. Authenticity may have first become a discursive possibility around the turn of the twentieth century. Keywords like "freedom" and "liberty" changed. But at all times individuals could find cultural constructions liberating or oppressive, irrational or consoling. Indeed, Wertsch encourages us to focus on the tension between individual agent and the cultural tool that the agent is using.<sup>11</sup>

While critics such as Joan Scott who have cautioned against use of experience as a category may have fairly challenged essentialism—the educational theory that all students should be taught the essential elements of their culture through traditional methods—I believe that we still need to focus further on how individuals frame and make choices.<sup>12</sup> In so doing, we can reaffirm our subject's basic insight: that in passing through an experience, whether the divorce of parents or the civil rights movement, people explore whether (and how) the experience might change them and how they might change the thing they were passing through.

### Re-enactment and Historical Empathy

In 1946 the English historian R. G. Collingwood assigned the term "re-enactment" to a process of re-experiencing the past.<sup>13</sup> I do not

<sup>10</sup>George Sanchez discusses "betwixt and between" in *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York, 1993); George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, ed. Charles W. Morris (1934; Chicago, 1967 ed.); William James, *The Principle of Psychology* (2 vols., New York, 1890), I, 294; Charles H. Cooley, *Social Organization: A Study of the Larger Mind* (New York, 1909); Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (New York, 1993).

<sup>11</sup>Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860; London, 1944 ed.); Ermarth, "Agency in the Discursive Condition," 45; T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1800–1920* (New York, 1981); Wertsch, *Mind as Action*, chapter 3.

<sup>12</sup>Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry*, XVII (Summer 1991), 773–97.

<sup>13</sup>R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1946; New York, 1957), especially Part V, Section 4. See also William H. Dray, *History as Re-Enactment: R. G. Collingwood's Idea of History* (New York, 1995).

mean exactly the same thing as Collingwood, but I will use his term—although “re-experience” or “re-inhabit” would also work—to name my proposal for history education. The basic purpose of re-enactment is to challenge the notion that history is about events that are over, closed. Re-enactment becomes a means to open events that look closed, to see possibilities, to frame choices, and above all to help us recognize how individuals, in the past and present, contain within them capacities that we can both uncover and exercise.

Let me illustrate what I mean by citing three groups, each the subject of my own recent research, that make re-enactment the core of their attempts to accomplish transformative change in areas of personal development, civics, and education:

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) provides a dramatic case of re-enactment framing civic agency and choice. The TRC re-enacted confrontations from the past, forcing perpetrators, victims, and bystanders to figure out what choices they faced in the past, what they wished they had done, and what they wanted to do now to take responsibility for what they did. At its heart re-enactment was designed to lay bare, in the TRC’s words, “the little perpetrator in each of us” and to force individuals to explore how they could experience the roles of victims, perpetrators, or bystanders at the same time. The TRC hoped that individual re-enactment and taking of responsibility for the past were the best means for moving from apartheid to democracy and thus for inspiring people to take responsibility for creating a culture of human rights.<sup>14</sup> The TRC’s challenge to citizens to weigh their responsibility for the past can ultimately move them toward a more democratic and active civics. Like several Dutch commissions that have questioned the Netherlands’ role in failing to protect Jews from Nazis, Muslims from Serbs, and Indonesians from Dutch war criminals, such public approaches to historical responsibility intersect what Dana Villa calls “Socratic citizenship”: the very hard work of questioning the framing made by others and developing one’s own individual moral civics.<sup>15</sup>

Here in Indiana, Conner Prairie presents the opportunity to explore challenges that all living-history museums face: how best to immerse people in another time and place. In its award-winning *Follow the North Star* program, visitors play the role of runaway slaves in 1836, as they negotiate the range of people that such

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<sup>14</sup>Transcripts for public testimonies can be found for “victims” (under Human Rights Violations Committee) and “perpetrators” (under Amnesty Committee) at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Website: [www.doj.gov.za/trc](http://www.doj.gov.za/trc). Perhaps the most probing overview of the stakes remains the memoir of the person who covered the hearings for radio broadcast: Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (Johannesburg, 1998).

<sup>15</sup>Dana Richard Villa, *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton, N.J., 2001); Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture,” *Social Research*, XXXVIII (Autumn 1971), 417-46.

runaways might have met. Many visitors report that the experience is overwhelmingly intense, as they try to frame and make choices first in their roles as slaves in 1836, and then as present-day citizens wondering about their responsibility for slavery and its consequences. Living-history museums have generated a rich literature on the theory and practice of how to challenge visitors with the differentness of the past in ways that often lead them to discover new things about themselves in the present.<sup>16</sup>

Alcoholics Anonymous, with 92,000 chapters the largest self-help movement in the world today, provides another model for re-enactment and responsibility. Rejecting formal institutional mechanisms, outside professional guidance, or political programs, AA provides opportunities for members to recreate and share their experiences of struggling with drink and addiction. The central challenge for AA, as for all twelve-step treatments, is a "serenity prayer" that succinctly summarizes the challenges of fixing agency: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Reporting their struggles to transform themselves from their hurtful behavior of the past, participants often describe a need to return to and take responsibility for the grief they have caused. Step Eight calls on them "to make a list of all persons we had harmed and become willing to make amends to them all," while Step Nine directs them to make amends to such people.<sup>17</sup>

These three diverse forms of re-enactment underscore the importance of two central points in the task of reconfiguring history education around re-enactment. First, I suggest that history students should recreate and then re-experience the open-endedness that participants faced in particular historical moments. They would "recreate the uncertainty and flux of the moment," in William Reddy's phrase: the colliding memories and anticipations that accompanied passage through what T. S. Eliot described as "a lifetime burning in every moment."<sup>18</sup> By creating and then inhabiting these challenging moments, students would experience for themselves both the realms of choice and the historical horizon that people face in the present as well as the past. Playing the roles of people in the past would make

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<sup>16</sup>I have been researching visitor experiences in *Follow the North Star* since 2002. Other treatments of living history museums include Stacy F. Roth, *Past into Present: Effective Techniques for First-Person Historical Interpretation* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998) and Stephen Eddy Snow, *Performing the Pilgrims: A Study of Ethnohistorical Role-Playing at Plimouth Plantation* (Jackson, Miss., 1993).

<sup>17</sup>Alcoholics Anonymous, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York, 1993); Matthew J. Raphael, *Bill W. and Mr. Wilson: The Legend and Life of A. A.'s Cofounder* (Amherst, Mass., 2000).

<sup>18</sup>William Reddy, "The Logic of Action: Indeterminacy, Emotion, and Historical Narrative," *History and Theory*, XL (December 2001), 31; T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," quoted in A. O. J. Cockshut, *Truth to Life: The Art of Biography in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1974), 13.



them conscious of the open-ended fluidity of experience, allowing them to use unfamiliar challenges from the past to understand themselves better. While emphasizing that external circumstances and discourses are contested and do change over time, re-enactment advocates since Giambattista Vico in eighteenth-century Naples have insisted that we are able to learn from history because we can recognize across time the open-endedness that other human beings confront, and the creativity they express, as they pass through experiences. "Every word, every sentence, every gesture or polite formula, every work of art and every historical deed is intelligible because the people who express themselves through them and those who understand them have something in common," wrote Wilhelm Dilthey in early twentieth-century Berlin: "The individual always experiences, thinks and acts in a common sphere and only there does he understand. Everything that is understood carries, as it were, the hallmark of familiarity derived from such common features."<sup>19</sup> This ability to re-experience open-endedness provides the starting point for re-enactment to challenge students to reach deeply within themselves.

Second, I suggest that students should explore how people go on to reconsider what they actually said or did in the past, a process that may unleash a flood of feelings like pride, regret, grief, guilt, self-doubt, or anger. As people reconsider, they can choose how to act—to apologize, re-pair, re-nege, re-habilitate, re-cant, re-venge. All these acts help people to take responsibility for consequences of past actions—their own and their societies'—and to reassure themselves or others of how they will face such actions in the future. Over the past half-century there has been a rapid spread of processes by which even nations make amends for actions they now regret, as the United States did with its apology and reparations, in the 1980s, to Japanese-Americans interned in camps in the 1940s.<sup>20</sup>

The goal of such an educational program, then, is to help students explore and develop individual capacities for framing choices and taking responsibility for what they or others have done. To widen their repertoire of experiences beyond their own, I propose "transporting" students into hard problems in the past, there to grapple with issues that in turn widen the range of personal qualities of temperament and agency they can recognize and use in their own lives. More particularly, let me propose a process for carrying this out.

We might start with an exercise in which students reflect on how they frame horizons of possibility and constraint in relation to a real problem in their everyday lives. Then they would observe how

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<sup>19</sup>Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Hayden V. White, eds., *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium* (Baltimore, 1969); H. P. Rickman, ed. and trans., *W. Dilthey Selected Writings* (Cambridge, England, 1976), 191.

<sup>20</sup>Yasuko L. Takezawa, *Breaking the Silence: Redress and Japanese American Ethnicity* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1995).

someone else, preferably with “other” social circumstances or cultural backgrounds, seeks to frame the same or a similar problem. They would not only sharpen their own skills for framing horizons but also explore how individuals face choices about what roles to play, what resources or traditions to draw on, how to use cultural materials to widen, not narrow, repertoires of problem-solving. And, with as rich a use of ethnographic skills as a teacher could present, they would reflect on how they and others can see or create wider possibilities for framing or acting.<sup>21</sup>

For the next steps, we would turn to more conventional historical subjects and materials. Students might identify the kinds of voices and sources they need in order to see how a particular person in the past framed a problem. Then they would gather and use documents and artifacts to recreate as fully as possible the horizon of possibility and constraint participants might have faced—including the kinds of pressures participants felt to move in one or another direction. A good recreation of experiences of slaves, for instance, would convey why slaves ran away or did not run away. We would see Abraham Lincoln agonizing with his conflicting feelings and moralities as he searched for words to answer Stephen Douglas in a debate for a Senate seat in 1858. We would see Thomas Jefferson and Henry Laurens agonize—and come to different conclusions—as revolutionary patriots about how to apply Jefferson’s phrase, “all men are created equal,” to their ownership of Africans as slaves.

Following this stage, students would take roles in a situation they recreate. Role-playing has a rich history in school classrooms, in part because it originates not in historical pedagogy but in everyday life, where people try out various roles to see how others react and how they feel about it. By moving among roles an agent can try on various historically and socially constructed roles for addressing problems that existed at different times. The trick in successful role-playing would be to construct challenging problems that drive students deeply into themselves. They should wonder: What makes this situation so tough? What can I, or we, do about it? What internal resources do I, or we, have to frame and choose amid the open-endedness of personal experience?

The next step would be for students to imagine themselves in a similar situation today and compare how they framed the earlier situation with the present one. In moving back and forth across time, they would explore how framing and choosing have changed or remained constant, how time and place shape what people experience as conventional or unconventional. Instead of focusing on the evils of present-mindedness, students would explore similarities and differences in how people experienced and constructed larger circumstances.

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<sup>21</sup>I am indebted to Henry Glassie, College Professor of Folklore, Indiana University, for this suggestion.

They would share Wilhelm Dilthey's recognition that individuals experience and create things differently at different times and places but also that they could re-experience what others had gone through (*nacherleben*) because they underwent what Dilthey called "the rediscovery of the I in the Thou."<sup>22</sup> The point of comparing past with present is to hone skills of opening the widest range of choices.

The final step in this process of connecting past with present would be for students to imagine how today they might take responsibility for their own or others' earlier decisions. They would explore a range of civic institutions and personal perspectives—such as those I have mentioned here—that people have developed to frame the act of taking responsibility for the past.

Clearly, we have a responsibility to build on the tremendous popular enthusiasm for history. By infusing historical teaching with the open-endedness of human experience, we can make the past an active tool for engaging the present.

## David Thelen's "Learning from the Past": A Conversation with the IMH

*Timothy Crumrin, Lonnie Bunch, and William Munn*

IMH: Based on the people whom you see in your classrooms, museums, or historic sites, what evidence do you see for David Thelen's contention that we face a "profoundly troubling paradox" in the ways in which people learn about and understand history?

Timothy Crumrin: I agree that there is often a "disconnect" between the average person and what they see as "history." For example, a comment we often hear from our museum visitors is that they did not know history could be so interesting, that they thought it was just names and dates, and saw no connection with their own lives. Part of that problem stems from how people "define" history. If they see it merely as "isms," strings of dates, or great overarching movements taught by a "dry" teacher, instead of seeing the human face (and thus their own face) of history, the chances of this disconnect are greater. If they were taught by an inspiring teacher (and they are many and their ranks are growing) who uses diverse methods to bring the subject "alive" and show the connections between the past, present,

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<sup>22</sup>The two best introductions to Dilthey in English are "Understanding of Other Persons and Their Expressions of Life," in Wilhelm Dilthey, *Descriptive Psychology and Historical Understanding* (The Hague, Netherlands, 1977), 123-44, and Dilthey, *Meaning in History and Society* (London, 1961).

and future, or if they have family or friends who instill a love and understanding of history, then they are a receptive audience/participant in learning and valuing the topic.

Much work has been done on various learning styles and obviously many approaches are needed. The “old-fashioned” way of lectures and reading assignments does not work alone. This is not to devalue that paradigm (indeed, it is a method I flourished under), but there are other methods, such as role-playing (reenactment), hands-on learning, and interactive technologies, that should all be a part of the mix.

I think public history has much to offer the classroom in terms of how to present history. Museums and other historical agencies have long-established methods for drawing in visitors and making them part of a learning experience. These continue to evolve. In fact, Conner Prairie has just begun a new initiative called “Opening Doors,” in which “visitor engagement” is considered an essential component of good interpretation and education. The idea is to pique interest in many ways. These include hands-on means (handing them a fur as a way of leading into an interpretation of the fur trade and Indian-White relations, for example) and “minds-on” means (such as asking visitors to compare an aspect of their lives with those of others who lived in the past).

I am unsure if the options discussed above are “redefining” or simply “refining” how we connect people with the past, but I believe active participation can be an element in that task. We are in a (probably short-lived) period in which “history” is “sexy”—as evidenced by the History Channel, interest in family history, etc.—and as historians, we need to find ways to capitalize on it.

Lonnie Bunch: As a historian who has spent most of his career in museums, I hear from a myriad of visitors how important history is to their families and to their communities. Almost immediately, however, they say, “I never really enjoyed the history that I experienced in high school and college.” For nearly a decade museums have realized that a key to their success is to provide visitors with personal encounters with the past that allow them to see themselves as actors in the great pageant that is history.

In some ways, museums have struggled to find ways for the public to “own” the past. There have been some real successes, especially with adult audiences. Exhibitions that draw from more recent history, that are rife with the personal stories that flow from the effective use of oral history, have contributed to a better understanding of the uses and the importance of history for a general audience. Also, exhibitions that explicitly link the past with the present, such as the National Museum of American History’s recent *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The History of Sweatshops in America*, have engaged audiences in ways that schools can only envy.

Unfortunately, museums have not consistently found ways to distance themselves from the public's sense of boredom with the traditional approaches to the past. Many museums are venerated but rarely visited. The attendance of many of the major urban history museums is surprisingly low. While museums have made great strides in serving and engaging audiences, I remain unconvinced that cultural institutions have really discovered ways to bridge the chasm between the public's personal interest in the past and their distaste with the traditional ways in which the past is taught and made accessible.

William Munn: Thelen correctly defines the paradox: popular history is hot, academic history is not—at least in the eyes of the general public. The author points to a renewed enthusiasm for museums, genealogy, and films as indicative of this growing audience. This is contrasted with the general public disaffection toward history as taught in the classroom.

It seems to me that both sides of the issue call for some analysis. Who is the audience for museums and other history providers? Are they taking part in the "gentrification" of vital topics? What is the story being told, and how is it selected? Would the audience sit still for a re-enactment of the Nat Turner revolt, the Pullman strike, or the Marion lynching? Do people really use the past actively and critically to live their lives or is history used to support conventional world views?

Thelen is on target in his critique of the public's "disconnect" and distrust of history as it taught in school. The subject has been presented as being close-ended. Discussion often is reduced to recitation and trivial pursuit. Having said that, it is my experience that many teachers, sometimes at their own peril, have ventured forth into "making experiences open-ended."

Coming out of college in the 1960s, I was convinced that it was my obligation to open up the closed areas. As many will recall, the public, through school officials, became very much opposed to this approach. To be fair, some of what was done deserved criticism. Yet the long-term result was a return to the standard narrative method.

What was missed, I think, and what Thelen correctly points out, was the connection of the "personal" with the historical. Using Frederick Douglass's writings to reflect on our own views on race and society, studying the history of our own home, interviewing grandfather about his experiences at Iwo Jima, or traveling the Underground Railroad at Conner Prairie can serve to make that connection. I also believe that by involving the public in these discussions, we can help turn mistrust and suspicion into support and understanding.

IMH: Each of you has spoken to the problems that you encounter as you try to get people to think of historical experience as more than

a closed body of facts. And all of you have hinted at specific projects or general techniques—in your own classrooms and museums or elsewhere—that you believe have overcome this problem. Could you tell us more about what has worked for you? Where have you been able to reach people in a visceral way that corresponds to Thelen's notion of "reenactment"?

TC: Thelen takes note of Conner Prairie's most visceral educational program, *Follow the North Star*. By its very nature (the adult program takes place at night and features a slave sale, gunfire, and a palpable aura of menace) *North Star* attempts to draw participants into another "reality." How well it succeeds is rather easily measurable in the debriefing sessions that follow. In these sessions participants share not only their reactions and emotions, but what they have learned about history and themselves. One of the most common comments is that they were forced to think about the decisions that had to be made and their possible consequences and felt an empathy with those in the past. The "facts" of slavery and interracial relationships become more than words on a page or concepts, they become internalized and analyzed.

Though the most intense, *North Star* is just one of our immersion programs. Another is the *Fall Creek Massacre Trial*, in which visitors observe a recreation of the trial of those charged with the murder of Native Americans and act as the jury. In our *Weekend on the Farm* program participants adopt personas created for them, spending up to three days and two nights living on our 1886 farm. They not only experience the physical world (privies and chamber pots instead of bathrooms, wood stove in lieu of a microwave) but also gain insight into daily life.

It should be noted that immersion may also be achieved by simpler means. Day-to-day living history interpretation allows for it. By merely taking part in a conversation with an interpreter (Conner Prairie's term for its docents or characters) visitors become part of a reenactment. This "conversation" is in essence one that takes place in a moment in time; it is open-ended, as our characters do not "know" the future.

What should not be lost in all this discussion of new ways to engage people with history is the inherent importance of basic education about the past in conjunction with immersion. In other words, to use a loaded term, the "facts." Not an "alienated body of facts," but a basic knowledge both for knowledge's sake and for the sake of providing context for the reenactment. Museums are certainly able to do this (all of the programs mentioned above have varying degrees of "pre-program education" elements attached to them), but seldom at the level or depth that can be obtained over the course of days and months in the classroom. That is why a marriage of these old and new paradigms can be such a powerful educational tool. The more

information about the past the participants have, the richer the reenactment experience—as a means both of learning about history and learning about themselves. Without at least a basic historical grounding, it devolves into a sort of “history as therapy.” This may work in a self-help sort of way, but it does little to advance the cause of history or our understanding of it.

WM: A couple of examples come to mind. I have had success with students interviewing older community members of the World War II generation for an oral history project. Students then presented their work to fellow students, community members, and to the subjects and their families. I recall a student interview of a former POW who had spent two years in a German prison camp. At the end of the student presentation, the man was given a very tearful standing ovation. Another student interviewed a group of older African Americans about their experiences growing up in a segregated Marion, Indiana. There was total silence in the group when the humiliations endured by the folks were recounted. I believe that the connection that Thelen describes was made.

On a less dramatic level, it has been my experience that the teacher can, through careful selection of primary source documents and reflective discussion and writing, involve students more deeply in the past. I was thinking of very intense discussions of selections from W. E. B. Du Bois, Thomas Jefferson, or Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Such discussions reach a level of importance only when we get to the part where the material’s personal significance is shared. I guess it is the old “modeling” theory. If you want students now, and later adults, to use history in this way, the process must be modeled in the classroom. It is my belief that if this is not done there, it will not be done elsewhere.

IMH: Thus far, we’ve treated Thelen’s comments primarily in terms of what they suggest about ways of conveying historical information. But could not the “re-enactment” approach, as outlined here, apply as much to the process of historical research as it does to education? I’d be curious to hear any examples that you think point not just to new curriculum and exhibition techniques but to a new understanding of the past.

TC: I think most historians have always incorporated at least some of the elements of reenactment. They just might use different terms, such as “empathy” or “understanding context.” Again to cite a personal example, I can point to our approach in interpreting the story of William Conner. One of the most difficult parts of the Conner story for the modern visitor to deal with is the fact that he sent away his Delaware wife of eighteen years, along with their six children, when the Delaware were removed in 1820, and that he remained on land

he later claimed in their name. By trying to put ourselves in his place (in effect, role-playing) we looked at his options. In brief, he could remain and keep his family with him. Would doing so raise opprobrium in a world that held Native Americans in generally low regard, and would such a reaction negatively affect his ambitions? He could go with his family (as his French trading partner did). But what would that mean for him? As a forty-something man who had lived his entire life on one frontier, did he consider himself too old to start a new life on another? He could stay and "send his family away" (to use a phrase a future in-law employed), and thus be in place to take advantage of being already established in a rapidly settling area.

In the end, we cannot know with any certainty which of the above were the most important factors in his decision, partly because Conner left no documents, like diaries or letters, to provide insight into his thinking. What we do know is that he remained and within three months married an eighteen-year-old woman he had previously met and expressed an attraction to. Did the thought of already having a "replacement" for his family (a "trophy wife," in the view of many of our modern visitors) make his decision easier? Again, we cannot be sure, but merely asking the questions, trying to assume his role, is illuminating. In a world of divorce, broken families, and relocation for economic reasons, the modern person can easily relate to and perhaps learn from, Conner's actions. If nothing else, the exercise helps one to understand better the context both of his times and of our own.

WM: A recent book which comes to mind is William Lee Miller's *Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography*. In this valuable work Miller uses a wide range of contemporary sources to trace the political and philosophical development of the Great Emancipator. Miller does so in ways that engage readers in the issues of Lincoln's time but also provide a template for examination of those same issues as they play out in their lives. Matters such as ambition and morality in politics, racism, and leadership, are all issues that we struggle with in our day. In my view, Miller manages not only to shed light on Lincoln's struggles, but invites readers to examine current leaders and even themselves.

As a teacher, I have found that extensive use of primary source documents in class discussion provides a means of greater engagement by students. For example, Frederick Douglass's "Fourth of July Speech," or the Socialist Party Platform of 1912, or the Roosevelt Corollary, closely read and discussed, can help students understand underlying issues and create a basis for the application of those ideas to their lives. A very successful technique for this type of discussion has been the "Socratic seminar," now used in many schools nationwide. This approach requires that the leader focus the group on a central question, for example, "Can a black person celebrate the Fourth of July?"



Students must use specific points from the text as a basis for discussion. The product of the discussion then serves as the basis for a written reflective piece on the questions raised in the document. I have found that the seminar technique, appropriately used, can be very useful in increasing the understanding and application of history for a wide range of students.