
Miriam E. Wells

Sam Wineburg’s *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* is unusual reading for those immersed in a rather specific type of academic writing within the discipline of history. However, Wineburg’s points are of use not only to secondary educators and psychologists, but also to professional academic historians, who are in fact also educators. In this way, the book is a good antidote to the near-constant refrain of college-educators that their students don’t know what to do with, or how to respond to historical texts—particularly primary source material.

In opposition to studies that discuss what students don’t know (about history or other topics), and then strategize concretely about the ways in which a deficiency might be remedied, Wineburg operates from the perspective of a researcher trying to determine what students do know about history, and the reasons they learn the way that they do. In his introduction, he discusses the lack of literature about history learning in the education field, which indicates that the essays in this book are both experimental, and path-breaking for further research.

This is good news, because Wineburg can’t offer conclusions—but instead, he can provide case studies that are intended to illuminate why a professional historian can read and interpret unfamiliar historical data better than an average student. To explore this, he delves into two areas: the disconnect between secondary educational methods and university-level historical education; and the set of preconceptions among children and young adults that make a certain kind of collective historical knowledge very difficult to dislodge.

Wineburg also offers case studies of teaching methods, without seeming overly judgmental about certain types of teaching methods. Instead, he describes each method from start to finish of a specific educational unit, and demonstrates its consequences, without adding personal commentary. His final comments about each type of teaching method highlight the strengths of the teacher, and the aspects of their method that might be criticized . . . and blessedly leaves the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. Any reader who has taught—and even those who have only experienced pedagogy from the student-side—will be aware of the skill sets that each kind of teaching reinforces, and in the end it is a judgment call for each individual to determine which skill sets are most essential.

Above all, Wineburg would like to know what situations—what kind of education—teaches people to ask new questions about history, or be willing to look beyond entrenched beliefs to form new conclusions.¹ Wineburg occupies a unique perspective to research this question. With background in religious history and

¹ In other educational areas, this might be considered a subset of “divergent thinking.”
psychology, Wineburg is able to conduct and interpret studies with contemporary children and young adults, which are both engaging and thought-provoking reading for people outside the education or psychology fields, while also adding the commentary of someone who understands the type of discourse in which professional historians engage. Of particular interest to me was the chapter on pictorial depictions of pilgrims, settlers and hippies, and the ways in which stereotypical depictions of these groups are reproduced by children.

Reviews of the book have been positive from both the education and history community—although the book enjoys only limited attention from the historical community, which is generally absorbed with reviews of the historical monograph. Still, the book was received positively in the Journal of American History, in which reviewer James Banner highlighted the open-endedness of the book. Educators can be pleased with the sometimes inspirational depictions of teaching by highly talented professionals, while brought abruptly back to earth by disturbing responses of students to subject matter touching upon ethics. Even in specific fields, such as planning, reviewers have taken some of the ideas to heart, as they apply to their particular fields.

Ultimately, readers are asked to take away two points. The first is that "historical thinking," in terms of encountering the mentality of people in the past, and being able to understand that apart from our contemporary experience, is a skill that not only does not come naturally, but most likely needs to be reinforced continually through a variety of teaching methods. The second is that there are no particular pedagogical lessons to be gleaned, as yet. It stands as a challenge to historians and educators alike.

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2 The book does not deal with two other possibilities that occurred to me: 1) that certain people are more inclined to think in this manner, taught to or not; and 2) that experience and age add enormously to the individual’s ability to think outside their own experiences and conceptual frameworks.