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Review of "The Challenge of Rethinking History Education: On Practices, Theories, and Policy"

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Bruce A. VanSledright, *The Challenge of Rethinking History Education: On Practices, Theories, and Policy*, Routledge, 2011.

The teaching of United States history at the K-12 level is fraught with debates about what should be taught, how it should be taught, what students should learn, and how teachers should assess student learning. In his recent work, *The Challenge of Rethinking History Education: On Practices, Theories, and Policy*, Bruce A. VanSledright weighs in this issue, arguing that current history practices are largely broken and focusing his research on what teachers need to know in order to teach effectively, and where and in what circumstances did teachers who teach effectively learn how to teach (1).

VanSledright begins by challenging what he calls the “collective-memory” (24) version of US history. A prevalent mission in US history curricula at the K-12 level is to inculcate children with a narrative of America filled with heroes, freedom, patriotism and exceptionalism. VanSledright argues that this narrative mission falls short on its own goals, as students continually fail the standardized tests that measure their knowledge of this collective story (27). Students’ acquisition of this narrative remains limited for a variety of reasons, according to VanSledright. First, the curriculum of the narrative requires low-level critical thinking. Students are not asked to challenge the narrative, question its sources, or write about its significance; instead, they are simply asked to memorize its story (25). Second, the collective story of America alienates students who do not fit into the collective image of an American, specifically non-white students. Thus, not all students embrace self-identification with the narrative (26).

More meaningful historical learning, VanSledright posits, involves student investigation, questioning, decision-making and allows students to become active participants in the creation of history (35). In brief, this is known as “historical thinking.” He devotes several chapters explaining how teachers think about history in this fashion, how they create lessons to develop these skills in students, and how they assess student knowledge. These chapters help make visible the processes of what some simply refer to as “good teaching,” which strengthens the book’s overall value.

Using the fictitious Thomas Becker as a model teacher, VanSledright describes how teachers who effectively develop historical thinking in their students possess a background themselves in historical thinking. These teachers most often have graduate degrees in history, where most historical thinking is modeled at the college level (35). Using his background in historical thinking, Becker crafted a unit on Cherokee Removal that involved more questions than answers. VanSledright outlines how Becker framed his unit on several thematic questions and used both print and on-line primary sources to generate inquiry sets for his students (43).

VanSledright momentarily shifts his attention away from the lesson to focus on Becker’s thought-process in developing this unit. Breaking Becker’s thoughts into foreground and background knowledge (49), VanSledright explains that teachers who focus on historical thinking use both content knowledge (foreground) and historiographical thinking (background) to craft engaging lessons. This foreground knowledge most directly connects to the narrative approach to history, specifically describing events, people, and movements. The background knowledge, however, emphasizes the historiographical training of graduate students in history. Examples of background knowledge include causation, change over time, historical context, and agency (50),



and they problematize the narrative trajectory of collective-memory history. The work, then, of an effective historical thinking teacher is to develop the background knowledge within his or her students.

Student thinking naturally develops as the next topic of analysis. Here, again, VanSledright exposes the thought process of high school history students. More specifically, he argues that students typically fall into three categories when thinking *about* history (66). The first type of thinking, called naïve realism, refers to the thought process where students believe whatever they read or hear to be absolutely true. They lack critical thinking and accept the belief in one correct story regarding an event. When exposed to conflicting sources, some students transition into the second type of thinking – naïve relativism. When confronted with disparate beliefs, students relegate all knowledge to opinion and argue that “anything goes” (66) because they lack the ability to evaluate sources. Helping students evaluate sources and knowledge can help develop students’ third type of thinking – critical pragmatism. In this model of thinking, students use the tools of background knowledge to evaluate weaker and stronger claims of historical knowledge. Rather than accepting all stories as truth or skeptically dismissing all sources, critical pragmatists become historical investigators, judging the merits of historical accounts. In order to engage his students as critical pragmatists, Becker developed a reading handout for students to complete as they focus on a primary source. This document, called a PAIR^e (75), requires students to analyze perspective, authorial attribution, identification, and reliability (through the use of evidence).

VanSledright then moves beyond the theory of historical thinking to the practical application of historical thinking in the classroom. He combines the content background of Thomas Becker with the focus on student thinking and creates a hypothetical unit plan on Indian Removal. This section of the book effectively describes the reality of classroom applications (ironic, as this is a hypothetical classroom), highlighting student struggles, time constraints, and uncertainty over student comprehension. Rather than assuming that everything will run smoothly, and students will emerge from the unit enlightened in the ways of historical thinking, VanSledright describes how the students’ document analysis takes longer than expected and classroom discussions remain unfinished as the bell rang (107). Even more importantly, he describes how to assess historical thinking skills through creative assessment methods.

The fictional Thomas Becker created a multiple-choice quiz with weighted distracters measuring the interpretive ability of the students (129). The choices with the higher weights connected to the higher level thinking of critical pragmatists, and Becker explained the weighted choices in a rubric for the students. Thus, rather than a constricting “right” or “wrong” answer, Becker can measure his students’ learning on a continuum of thinking. He also created an essay question to further measure students’ historical thinking skills. These types of assignments reinforce the capabilities of both students and teachers to implement historical thinking skills in the classroom beyond the collective-memory narrative model.

The strengths of this work include VanSledright’s ability to uncover the thought processes of both teachers and students, clearly organized lessons that develop historical thinking skills, and specific, analytical assessments that effectively measure student learning. One of the greatest strengths involves breaking down the thought process of teachers in both thinking about history and thinking about teaching. These sections demystify what researchers tend to label “good



teaching.” Rather than connecting these historical thinking concepts to individual teachers who “just seem to get it,” VanSledright offers a model to encourage the historical thinking skills in all history teachers.

Moreover, he also identifies specific categories of student thinking. Though these categories are generalizations, they help teachers identify general trends in how students process historical information. When teachers recognize these thinking patterns, they can anticipate not only student questions, but also student struggles. With this anticipatory knowledge, teachers can more effectively maximize teaching time because they can focus the lesson on dealing with these questions up front and then moving on to develop more critical thinking. In other words, VanSledright makes visible the way that “good teachers” seem to know what students are going to ask before they even ask questions. Again, this shifts attention away from the idea that some teachers just get it, and moves towards an idea that all teachers can reflectively understand student thinking.

Furthermore, since teachers can understand student thinking, they can measure the growth of student learning through meaningful assessments. Standardized testing has consumed education in full-force since the development of No Child Left Behind legislation, and teachers continually feel pressure to reduce assessments to multiple-choice tests. VanSledright offers modifications to multiple-choice tests that allow more nuanced understandings of student learning. Other models, such as the Stanford History Education Group’s “Beyond the Bubble” assessments (<http://beyondthebubble.stanford.edu/>) offer more opportunities for history teachers to break out of the traditional uses of multiple-choice tests.

The last strength of this work may also be considered a weakness. Though VanSledright is critical of the collective-memory narrative approach to history, his alternative of historical thinking does not completely eliminate the narrative, but problematizes it to offer different narratives, or a narrative that encourages the critical nature of democracy in America. Similarly, though critical of multiple-choice tests, he offers modifications, not alternatives. These modifications are strengths in that they offer changes for teachers who, like the sample teacher in the introduction of this work, embrace a collective identity of American history. Thus, these teachers may be less apprehensive to implement historical thinking in their classroom. On the other hand, merely problematizing the narrative may prove insufficient to researchers and teachers who feel the narrative is inherently restrictive. In their eyes, VanSledright may be part of the problem, rather than the solution.

The most significant weakness of this work, however, hovers around two related questions: (1) who is VanSledright’s intended audience? (2) who will *actually* read this book? The intended audience remains unclear because VanSledright highlights problems with the very groups he may be intending to influence. First, VanSledright criticizes historians who do not reveal the inner workings of historical thinking to most students, with the exception of graduate students (34-5). Then, he offers a hypothetical model teacher who was one of those graduate students. Thus, the message seems to be that the teachers who most effectively teach historical thinking earned a graduate degree in history. In his conclusion, VanSledright exposes institutional barriers to history teaching reform including teacher education programs, state departments of education, and school districts as well as historians (173), so perhaps these groups are also his intended audience.



However, this brings up a related question, because even though he intends for these groups to read this work, how or where will they actually come to read this book?

Again, who will actually read this book? Historians have no vested interest in including this book in their curricula because they believe historical thinking to be implicit in their teaching. Furthermore, in which history class would this be assigned, and would it even be necessary? Thomas Becker focused on historical thinking because of his graduate training. Teacher education programs, specifically social studies programs, make sense as an intended audience, but these programs focus on other subjects besides history, such as economics or geography or they focus on social education and social justice, which criticize the narrative nature of history as alienating and oppressive. Thus, they may not assign this book as a part of their curriculum because of limited time or a rejection of the book's premises. Though VanSledright's argument regarding historical thinking is important, it might remain unheard.

Perhaps as a footnote, two flaws exist in the structure of the work that do not detract from the overall argument. The first involves the use of hypothetical examples, rather than real life experiences. VanSledright's choice to structure the book in this fashion remains unclear. Did he find the Institutional Review Board process too time consuming to apply for approval of a real-life study? Perhaps more troubling, are there no real-life examples upon which to build his research? Real-life examples would enhance the credibility of his argument. Secondly, since VanSledright presents hypothetical examples, why did he choose male examples and a male-centered unit plan on Indian removal? Could an effective teacher also be female? Could students develop historical thinking skills using primary sources that were written by women or about women? These choices speak to the dilemma that all teachers face in what materials to include and how to engage students. Six days spent focusing on Indian removal means six less days focused on materials like women's experiences during the same time period. Though unintentional, groups and individuals are excluded in favor of the inclusion of others. Ultimately, I found the arguments in *The Challenge of Rethinking History Education: On Practices, Theories, and Policy*, by Bruce A. VanSledright compelling, but its reach may be limited.

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