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COUNTERFACTUAL HISTORY: GOOD TEACHING, BAD HISTORY?

PART II

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In the previous edition of *Rapport*, I explored the apparent paradox of why counterfactual history is simultaneously an effective strategy for promoting brain growth (synaptic connections in the prefrontal cortex) and yet an approach to history decried by many academic historians. In that article I attempted to both address the concerns of historians by making a case for counterfactual history as an interesting lens through which to consider the past, as well as attempting to show that our history classrooms are not merely incubators of future historians. If we hope to instill a love of history and create effective critical thinkers of all our students, then engaging strategies such as counterfactualism are important tools in the history teacher's repertoire.

Given that my readers have remained loyal thus far, I am going to assume that I have had some success in building the case for the use of counterfactual history in our classrooms. Building upon this assumption, it is my intent in this article to set out some guidelines for the effective use of counterfactual history. I invite your feedback on the ideas presented and any successes or challenges you may experience in your classroom. Perhaps a workshop at OHASSTA's fall conference on counterfactual history would be a fitting follow-up to these two articles. Your thoughts can reach me at gnewman@edu.yorku.ca.

Guidelines for Using Counterfactual History

- 1. Use scenarios which could have easily gone the other way.**
 - Counterfactual scenarios work best when the event which did occur "turned on a dime", or where key decisions or events happened which could easily have happened differently.
- 2. Counterfactuals must be plausible.**
 - The scenarios used must be believable and based on historical evidence – to pose a counterfactual scenario which considers a Polish victory over the Nazis in 1939 is futile as the overwhelming superiority of the Germans makes this scenario implausible.
- 3. Counterfactual scenarios should not require a series of changes.**
 - Counterfactual scenarios work best when a specific decision, event or factor can be identified which was significant in charting a historical course of events – when several changes need to occur for the alternate history to occur the counterfactual scenario becomes increasingly implausible.
- 4. Avoid beginning with a preconceived view of history as you would like it to have been.**
 - For counterfactual history to be a useful historical tool it must not be caught in the trap of first imagining history as we would like it to have been then re-imagining events so as to create the history of our desires.
- 5. Be careful not to reach erroneous conclusions based on faulty reasoning.**
 - Counterfactual is a valuable but not easy intellectual tool. Its validity is dependent on careful and sound analysis based on historical evidence available. Counterfactual history is prone to fallacies in reasoning, and if so tainted becomes useless and open to derision.
- 6. Consequences must be based on sound reasoning and historical evidence.**
 - For example, what evidence suggests that Henry VIII would have remained Catholic had he had a male heir? What evidence suggests World War One would have occurred even if Archduke Franz-Ferdinand had not been assassinated?

7. Remember, counterfactual history is a valuable intellectual exercise which can assist in challenging historical assumptions and conclusions but it can never lead to a definitive alternate history – at best it can suggest what might have been.

Counterfactual History and Critical Thinking: So far our focus has been on the use of counterfactual scenarios as a historical tool. But not all our students are going to become historians. In fact only a select few will even study history in a post-secondary setting. Counterfactualism is an excellent way to engage all learners and provide them with the tools to be effective thinkers regardless of their educational and career paths. Consider how doing counterfactual history fits with Roland Case's Critical Thinking Model. Case identifies five key attributes of exemplary critical thinkers: habits of mind, thinking strategies, background knowledge, conceptual knowledge and criteria. Successful use of counterfactual history draws upon each of these six key attributes.

Habits of Mind: Being open-minded, persistent and flexible are all habits of mind vital to good critical thinking. Studying history can become mired in a plethora of dates, names and events but the use of counterfactualism requires that we are open to new challenges and are flexible in our thinking, that we can restate problems and look for connections with known features.

Thinking Strategies: Good critical thinkers not only are flexible and open-minded but also have a variety of thinking strategies at their disposal ranging from simply restating a problem in your own words to more elaborate strategies such as using a decision-making model to arrive at a conclusion. Counterfactual history provides an excellent opportunity for students to learn, practice and apply a variety of thinking strategies. Mindmaps and concept maps are both powerful strategies students can use to assist them in seeing the connections vital to making sense of history and are particularly useful in imagining an alternate history.

Background Knowledge: Roland Case reminds us that: "It should be obvious that we cannot think critically about a topic if we know little or nothing

about it. Yet this fact is overlooked if we treat critical thinking as a set of general skills that can be applied regardless of context." Hence, teaching critical thinking in a vacuum is not merely ineffective, it may be counter-productive. Using counterfactual history provides an opportunity for teachers to integrate both historical content and good critical thinking. Students must have a sound understanding of the historical events as well as their future repercussions. Further, they must have an understanding of the connections between the immediate events studied and related events and be able to see causal relationships. Adequate background knowledge of the specific events and of the more broad implications is vital for students to be able to play in the world of counterfactualism.

Counterfactual history, by its very nature, challenges students to develop an understanding of historical cause and effect, to see trends over time and to focus on the big ideas of history while considering how micro-history may have had significant consequences.

Conceptual Knowledge: In order for students to think deeply about the causal relationships and the implications of historical events necessary to effectively dabble in counterfactual history, they develop a conceptual understanding of metacognition. This entails acquiring the vocabulary of thinking so that they can accurately use words to identify or recognize key distinctions. Case's framework for critical thinking reminds us that "if students cannot distinguish a premise from a conclusion or do not know what a reason is, they are less likely to provide sound justifications for their opinions. Knowing the difference between 'cause' and 'correlation' is crucial when analyzing objects and events. Without this conceptual distinction students are more likely to incorrectly view a factor that simply occurs concurrently with another (e.g., an ore sample may contain granite and be smooth) as a factor that influences the other." Counterfactual history, by its very nature, challenges students to develop an understanding of historical cause and effect, to see trends over time and to focus on the big ideas of history while considering how micro-history may have had significant consequences.

Criteria: Critical thinking is essentially making judgments in light of criteria. It is not sufficient for students to merely proclaim their likes or dislikes or to state their opinion on an issue devoid of any legitimate rationale. Instead, students need to develop the ability to deliberate on issues in a thoughtful manner. By having students work with criteria, they acquire good critical thinking skills and the ability to effectively formulate and defend a point of view on an issue. Above I have suggested seven criteria for the effective use of counterfactual history (see Guidelines for Using Counterfactual History). Using the guidelines as criteria, students can assess counterfactual histories they encounter, they can self-assess historical events they would like to consider for counterfactual treatment, and they assist fellow students in testing the validity of the counterfactual scenario they have created.

Counterfactual and the History Classroom

Using counterfactual scenarios can be an effective means to engage students in learning history. To introduce students to the idea of counterfactual history consider showing them the first twenty minutes of the movie *Sliding Doors*. In this movie, Gwyneth Paltrow plays a young woman who gets fired from her job. On her way home she barely manages to get on the subway as the doors close. At this point the movie backs up and we see her just failing to get on the subway. From this point the movie follows Paltrow's character from the two scenarios; one where she gets on the subway, gets home relatively quickly and catches her live-in boyfriend with another woman; the other whereby she missing the subway, must take a cab to get home, but is mugged while waiting for a cab. By the time she gets home, the other woman has left. A chance occurrence has significant consequences on her life. After viewing this excerpt from the movie ask students to select an event or decision in the lives of their parents that could have significantly altered their (the students) lives. Students can construct parallel mind-maps to show the impact of the actual decision/event and the counterfactual scenario. This quick activity helps to lay the foundations for students working with counterfactuals. Below are a number of suggested scenarios to consider using in your classroom:

Scenarios

Socrates Dies at Delium, 424 BCE (from *What If?2*)

As a forty-five year old hoplite soldier in the Athenian army, Socrates managed to escape death and capture. This brush with death came before Socrates had established himself as a great philosopher and before he had met and taught Plato. What impact would the death of Socrates at Delium have had on the history of Western philosophy?

Galileo Dies After a Summer Siesta (from *Galileo's Daughter*)

Florence experiences unbearably hot summers. To escape from the oppressive heat, Florentines often took afternoon siestas in caves found in the Tuscan hills. As a young man, Galileo, liked to escape the summer heat in just such a manner. One summer, before he had established his reputation as a great scientist and astronomer, Galileo and three friends spend an afternoon in a Tuscan cave. While resting, a noxious vapour was released in the cave. Two of the men died in their sleep, a third succumbed to the fumes within a week. Of the four men who went into the cave, only Galileo survived, and even was ill from the effects of the mysterious gas. What if Galileo had been one of the three men who died from the fumes? What impact would this have had on the history of western science?

French are the First up the St. Lawrence in the Spring of 1760

One of the most commonly taught lessons in Canadian history is that the Battle of the Plains of Abraham was a seminal point in Canadian history. But was it? At about the same time the famous battle was being fought, the British and French fleets were engaged in two key naval battles; one at Quiberon Bay, and the other off the coast of Lagos. As the fleets were evenly matched, these naval encounters could have gone either way. In the end, the British prevailed in both battles, and as a result gained control of the high seas. A consequence of these two naval battles was that the British would be the first ships up the St. Lawrence bringing supplies and reinforcements and leading to the capitulation of Montreal. What if the French had won these naval battles and were the first up the St. Lawrence? Would the British have held Quebec? Would New France stay in the hands of the French?

Archduke Franz Ferdinand Survives Gavril Princip's Assassination Attempt

The bullet which killed Franz-Ferdinand came from the gun of the second assassin. Minutes earlier, the Archduke had survived an assassination attempt and had been diverted down another street only to face the gun of a Gavril Princip. What if the motorcade had chosen a different street and thus Archduke Franz-Ferdinand survived the assassin's bullets? Would World War One have happened? This is a great question to test students understanding of causation versus triggers. (from *Canada: A Nation Unfolding*)

Quebec Referendum Favours Separation

Canadians breathed a collective sigh of relief after the 1995 Quebec referendum. With the vote a close 49.5% no to 50.5% yes, Canada had narrowly averted a constitutional and national crisis. What if these numbers were reversed? How would Canada have responded? How would the world have responded to Canada? What kind of Canada would we now be living in?

Counterfactual History and Assessment

Using counterfactual history in the classroom can provide an excellent vehicle for building units as well as constructing innovative assessments. Posing a counterfactual question can serve as a means to set out enduring understandings for either a course or a unit. For example, the question of the Plains of Abraham can be posed at the outset of a course, and then followed throughout the course using a graphic organizer such as a Future Wheel. Similarly, students could be asked to consider the importance of Alexander the Great by posing the question at the outset of a unit on the Greco-Roman world. The question could then appear on a unit test which could be answered in either the form of an essay or a mind-map.

Counterfactual questions are valuable tools for testing student understanding of historical events and causation. A question such as "What if Henry VIII's daughter Mary had been a boy?" can force students to consider the implications of Henry's need for a male heir and the impact on the direction of English and indeed world history. In fact, this question would be most effective if it appeared on a final exam of the West and the World course.

Counterfactual history can also be the basis for engaging performance based assessment. Students can search for their own counterfactual scenario and then be asked to write a piece of historical fiction based on an excerpt from a Culminating Activity set out in the Teacher's Resources which accompanies *Legacy: The West and the World*.

Playing with counter-factual history is a wonderfully creative way to consider the impact of key events in world history. It also provides a framework within which to develop imaginative works of historical fiction. Your challenge is to write a historically sound piece of fiction which considers a "what if...?" scenario. To complete this task you will need to identify a significant world event. Counter-factual history works best when based on an event which could easily have gone another way.

To complete this task, you will need to do some cursory background reading, develop a counter-factual (or "what if...?") question based on the background reading, develop a bibliography of sources which address both the specific individual or event and the general time period, prepare research notes on both the specific individual or event and the general time period, prepare an outline for your counter-factual piece of fiction, and write a draft and polished version of your historical fiction.

Note: Your historical fiction can be written as:

- a short story, a script, a children's story

To meet this challenge you will need to complete steps outlined below:

- do some cursory background reading and prepare a central counter-factual ("what if...?") question
- prepare an annotated bibliography of between 6 and 10 sources. The bibliography must use proper format and be in alphabetical order. The annotations must clearly explain the value of the source to the challenge. The sources must address both the specific individual/event and the general time period
- prepare 4-6 pages of research notes which focus on the individual/event and the general time period. The notes must be drawn from 4-6 sources in the bibliography, be in point form, indicate source and page, and reflect a sound understanding of the material

- *Prepare an outline of the story*
- *Write a draft of the story*
- *Revise, edit and polish your story based on feedback received*

Remember: The “Guidelines for Using Counterfactual History” can serve as excellent criteria for teacher, peer or self assessment of the validity of counter-factual scenarios. This will help to ensure sound assessment practice and contribute to the development of students’ critical thinking abilities.

Conclusion

Brain research confirms that students learn best when they are engaged and challenged in a supportive environment. History classrooms too often carry the undeserved reputation of being boring with too great a focus on memorizing names and dates. In our on going challenge to engage students in the study of history counterfactualism can be a useful tool if properly used. Following the guidelines set out above, counterfactual history supports the development of critical thinking and infuses history with creativity.

Resources

Case, R. Daniels, L. “Preconceptions of critical thinking” (unpublished manuscript)

Cowley, Robert, *What If?* New York: Berkley Books, 2002

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The Imagined Past, CBC transcript, Ideas, July 17, 1998
