

HABIT

6

KEEPING HISTORY IN PERSPECTIVE

When I started working on women's history about thirty years ago, the field did not exist. People didn't think that women had a history worth knowing.

Gerda Lerner

THE VALUE OF A BALANCED PERSPECTIVE

To teach history is sometimes to deal with dilemmas. How much traditional history do we retain and how much postmodern history do we adopt? Should we still encourage students to empathize with people in history when the postmodernists warn that they inevitably will see things through today's lenses? All of us know we need to send the message that history is important – but must we always emphasize its significance? We know history is a serious study, but when is it appropriate to use the offbeat, the humorous, and the bizarre to engage students? Finally, we know that we have to be responsible in teaching history, but what are the parameters of our responsibility?

THE OLD STORY AND NEW STORIES

How can you get a healthy perspective on the contrasts between traditional and postmodern philosophies of history (see Habit 5, Acting as a Historian)? As the quotation that opens this chapter underscores, there is no question about the importance of new directions in history. However, does postmodern philosophy mean that you must necessarily reject traditional approaches? No, it does not. Don't throw away your texts and teaching notes that may promote a storyline or a strong single narrative. Simply recognize these for what they are – generalizations or “big-picture” statements to help you and your students cope with the minutiae. It also helps to look at some parts of traditional

history as metaphor – for example, “waves of immigration” – as the storyline in Canadian history.

Like all holistic constructs, storylines, unifying narratives, and metaphors tend to overgeneralize and to omit the exceptions. So use that reality. For example, continue to use the image of waves of immigration sweeping from east to west across Canada. But then ask your students to find the exceptions or the weaknesses in the metaphor – for example, how do the First Nations fit into this image? what about those American immigrants from the south? or the first western settlements in what became British Columbia? Next, use the metaphor as an organizer for looking at the experience of immigration – how did expectations and realities differ for the earliest wave compared with later waves? how were immigrants in each wave received? how successful was each wave? how did governments influence the size and composition of the waves?

Overall, what I propose above is that you use the best parts of traditional history’s storylines. Besides the traditional holistic constructs, you can also retain the emphasis on key developments, landmarks, and turning points – for modern Canadian history, for example, these would include events like participation in the First World War, the NORAD agreement, the October Crisis, and Nunavut’s birth as a territory. These parts of traditional history allow students to look for overall patterns and to note important transformations.

We should also use the best parts of postmodern history. Take, for example, the postmodern focus on those who have been overlooked in traditional history. Some traditionalists suggest that writing about these previously unheard voices does a disservice to the core topics of history. An extreme example of this view is American academic Mason Cooley’s statement: “Radical [postmodern] historians now tell the story of Thanksgiving from the point of view of the turkey.” As teachers, we need to get past this sort of unproductive thinking.



If you enjoy reading quotations, visit Great Books Online, linked at www.emp.ca/ninehabits.

There are good reasons for embracing the new social histories: (1) it is equitable to redress the imbalance caused by the omission of minorities from earlier traditional history – that is, to add new stories to the mosaic of history; (2) the previously untold stories will resonate with many students who will see reflections of their own lives or who have a strong sense of social justice. I would add another critical point, one that links the traditional and the postmodern. In these new stories, we are *not* talking about compensatory history in the sense of just adding what had been missing; rather, we are looking at history that brings a new light to traditional understanding, to what some might call standard history. John Ware (see Habit 5) deserves to be recognized not because he was black, but because he was a significant figure in Alberta’s history. He was one of the first cowboys in Alberta; he introduced the sport of rodeo, which became a symbol of the west; and today he is acknowledged as a representative of an important, and sometimes overlooked, phase in Alberta’s history – the day of the commercial ranch companies and

grazing leases. His accomplishments as a historical figure are significant. That he was a former slave who carved out his place in history when racism flourished simply adds to his stature. To see John Ware as a black person inserted in history as compensatory exercise is to marginalize and trivialize him.

A PERSPECTIVE ON EMPATHY

Let's return to a point I raised in Habit 1. When we encourage our students to use their imaginations to understand history, we often ask them to put themselves into the shoes of people in the past – that is, to empathize. Yet, according to postmodern thinking, students will inevitably construct an understanding based on today's world. When students say to themselves, "we do that in this way today" or "our beliefs tell us that is wrong," they bring presentisms to the exercise. The more they try to understand the past person by thinking, "I would have done this," or by looking for analogies in their own lives, the more they exhibit the paradox of empathy. Does that mean that we can never see another's perspective because of the overwhelming influence of our own perspective? Are we handcuffed by the paralysis of perspective?

Admittedly, it is hard to put ourselves into the shoes of people in the past whose whole context is different from our own in every respect, from beliefs to technology. But let's not abandon the approach. It is still valuable as a concrete procedure for students to connect with past people. Moreover, relating new experiences to our own context is the way we make sense of the world. If we uncritically accepted the paradox of empathy and the paralysis of perspective, we could never enjoy a movie or identify with a character in a book. As history teachers, we need to find the means to mitigate the paradox. Figure 6.1 sets out some helpful steps. (See also figure 6.2.)

When we ask our students to empathize with the considerations of figure 6.1 in mind, we may avoid the paradox of empathy and the paralysis of perspective. But we need to recognize that the exercise is framed by two fundamental qualifications. First, we can never fully reconstruct the past because we never have all the evidence and all the perspectives from the time. Second, we cannot replicate the depth or scale at the extreme levels of human misery or exaltation. We might ask our students to empathize with the victims of racism by asking them to recall parallel experiences – for example, being discriminated against because of age. Yet no parallel – even modern racism, where recourse can be made to civil and human rights – allows anyone to feel the anguish and despair of racism that earlier people experienced when there was absolutely no possibility of relief. Nor might students fully recreate the feelings of triumph of a Dr. Salk, a James Watt, a Nelson Mandela, or a Nellie McClung by thinking of their own exaltation in winning a personal award. Yet not only can we understand and accept these qualifications, we can discuss them with our students.

FIGURE 6.1 A Guide for Empathizing

- Put forward “shoes” that relate to the students’ experience (even though we are flirting with the paradox of empathy).
- Ensure that you teach the historical circumstances for empathy – for example, daily life and work, political and religious structure, social structure and social norms, economic system, technology, arts and crafts, and environment.
- Reconstruct the personal context of the historical person with your students – that is, the influence of place, class, wealth, privilege, values and beliefs, ethnicity, gender, and age.
- Encourage your students to find the parallels between their lives and the lives of figures from the past.
- Encourage your students to see the contrasts between their lives and past lives.
- Re-emphasize the differences in circumstances and context.
- Monitor for presentisms and anachronisms.
- Debrief for deep historical understanding. For example, how did the empathized figure fit into the main trends of the time? What prompts our impulses about how we would act if we had been there? Why couldn’t the historical person have acted that way? What is there that is universal to the human condition in this person’s life? What is there that is completely unique to that time and place?

NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE IN PERSPECTIVE

Postmodern historians sometimes appear to display an excess of cynicism as they focus on the history of the overlooked, the discriminated against, and the wronged. They decry traditional history because these aspects of history were consistently overlooked, either through narrowly focused research or through the prevailing perspectives of the writers of history. As I think back on my own schooling, I find examples to illustrate this point:

- We covered the Battle of Britain, but not the bombing of Dresden.
- We studied Canada and the United States in the Second World War, but not the treatment of Japanese-Canadians and Japanese-Americans.
- We learned that the atomic bomb ended the war with Japan sooner than might have happened otherwise. We never knew there was any controversy about that “fact.”
- We marvelled at the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, but studied little about the Chinese labourers and nothing about the head tax they had to pay to bring over their families.
- We made notes about the *Indian Act* and the advantages it offered, but learned nothing about abuses in Canadian residential schools.

FIGURE 6.2 Page from an 1873 Textbook



You might ask students to put themselves into the shoes of a Canadian living at a time when loyalty to the British Empire was strong. To do so, they need dramatic evidence like this from an 1873 school text.

Source: Hodgins (1873: 36).

- We learned about the growth of slavery in 18th-century United States, but were unaware it existed in Britain and Canada.

Postmodern historians have brought to light all these topics, and more, that I was denied in history. To expose controversies, chronicle the omissions, and expose the racism, injustices, and crimes of the past is a healthy development. What is less healthy is to reorient the focus of history exclusively on the wrongs, the crimes, the scandals, and the injustices. Some historians with feet in the traditionalist camp have reacted against this possibility. Their concerns (see Habit 1) are best summed up by well-known Canadian historian Jack Granatstein in his comments on current history teaching:

[W]e prattle about our sins, persuading schoolchildren that this society, if it has any past at all, has a history that is overwhelmingly one of oppression and shame. ... Canadian children are made to wallow in the sins of the past, being told of a Canada that oppressed minorities, natives, and women and, moreover, despoiled the environment.

Granatstein (2005)



Jack Granatstein was quoted on the Teaching History website, accessible at www.emp.ca/ninehabits.

To my mind, Granatstein exaggerates to make his point, but there is a point to be made. As history teachers, we need to discuss both the achievements and the failures of society. Otherwise, we present either a one-dimensional depressing picture, as described by Granatstein, or we get a saccharine-soaked version where only the positive achievements are catalogued. Students deserve more than that. We need to balance the shameful episodes with related positive steps – for example:

- We must deal honestly with the treatment of Japanese-Canadians in the 1940s, the abuses of former residential school students, and the treatment of Chinese-Canadians who paid the head tax. But we also need to teach about the federal government's apologies and redress agreements for each of these cases. The wrongs cannot be undone, but the admission of error and the atonement must be taught, too.
- We must deal with painful episodes of racism suffered by blacks in the past. At a time when slavery was common in many countries, there was also slavery in Canada and Britain. But we also need to teach that Upper Canada took the first steps toward abolishing slavery in 1793, by banning the importation of slaves and freeing slaves born in the colony at age 25, and that Britain abolished slavery at home and throughout the British Empire in 1834. Blacks in both Britain and Canada were still discriminated against through to modern times, but important steps toward legal equality had been taken.
- We need to address the discrimination, racism, and denial of rights that existed in earlier societies. At the same time, wherever and whenever we can, we must teach the steps taken throughout history that gradually established civil and human rights – for example:
 - in ancient history, the first codes of law;
 - in the Middle Ages, the first steps toward civic rights in the Magna Carta;
 - in European history, the philosophical concept of rights in the Enlightenment;
 - in modern world history, the UN *Declaration of Human Rights*;

- in American history, the Constitution and the civil rights movement;
- in Canadian history, the *Bill of Rights* and the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

Attention to such topics will allow students to recognize that, throughout history, while rights abuses remain, much has been gained. Let me summarize:

1. Teaching about intolerance and injustices does not mean that we are teaching students to be cynical and hopeless. It does not mean that students will feel overwhelming shame about their history. In fact, we are respecting our students by providing them opportunities to explore the truth and, in the process, helping them develop a mature perspective on their past. As we do so, we need to be sensitive to the feelings of students in today's classes, both those whose ancestors were wronged and those who belong to the dominant group responsible for injustices at the time.
2. The stories of shameful episodes and how individuals and society have overcome them, or still strive to do so, will allow students to feel admiration for those who break through barriers and to see a promise for the future in history.
3. Overall, we can help our students appreciate that while history is not a story of uninterrupted progress, neither is it a story of unmitigated descent into decay. To tell students that there is no progress in their future will do little to cause them to adopt a positive outlook on life or to see value in history. What we can do is give students the message that as flawed as our society is, it was built on the efforts of people in history, just as their own efforts will build a society for the future.

IT'S IMPORTANT, BUT NOT THAT IMPORTANT

I think that history is an important subject. It has personal value for students and, when taught well in schools, society benefits. History is also a valuable subject for students' careers. Over the centuries, historians and philosophers have endorsed history's importance, perhaps none more so than historian David Brion Davis, who wrote that history separates us from other animals by developing our

ability to transcend an illusory sense of NOW, of an eternal present, and to strive for an understanding of the forces and events that made us what we are. Such an understanding is the prerequisite, I believe, for all human freedom.

Davis (2006), accessible at www.emp.ca/ninehabits

Let's recap history's importance: it provides the backdrop for understanding oneself and society, it shapes national identities, and it provides guideposts for looking toward the future. Studying history develops many practical life skills, prepares students for careers, and offers other benefits, which I describe in Habit 9. Yet I must admit to some disquiet when I hear history teachers declaring that history is without question the most important subject. And I am concerned when some teachers are dismissive of students who don't see that importance. To some extent, I can understand these teachers' positions, because history is not always seen as an important subject by parents, industry, government leaders, or curriculum planners. But let's get this business of history's importance in perspective.

Is history the most important subject? Some might propose that language arts is more important. How can we understand anything about history, or any other subject, if we are not literate? What about physical and health education? We can accomplish the most in studies and in life if we are well and fit. How about religion or philosophy? Then again, perhaps our focus is too narrow. Maybe the grouping of math, sciences, and technology is most important. Or are the liberal arts – in which history takes a prominent place – the most important part of education? The debate could continue with other subjects put forward as the most critical. My point here is that there is a debate; it is not universally agreed that history is the most important subject. We need a healthy perspective on the matter. We need to teach so that students can experience and appreciate the value of history without necessarily making claims for its paramount status.

We also need to remember that for each student some school subjects, in terms of natural interest, academic success, and career planning, are more important than others. History is one of 10 or 12 subjects that students will take in school. We can't expect everyone to be as enthusiastic about its importance as we history teachers are.

What does all this mean for teaching our subject successfully?

- We need to stop from time to time and remind ourselves of the above considerations and put history's importance in perspective.
- We need to be passionate in our teaching. For students who may be slow to see history's value, passion may win them over. Passion is contagious. We hope that reluctant history students will be won over by our choice of interesting examples or by our effective teaching strategies. But they are more likely to become enthusiastic about history if they can perceive our positive attitude toward it. As Margaret McFarland, a well-regarded educator puts it, "attitudes are not taught, they are caught."



Historian and Pulitzer Prize winner David McCullough quoted Margaret McFarland in "Knowing History and Knowing Who We Are," a speech he delivered on February 15, 2005 in Phoenix, Arizona at a Hillsdale College National Leadership Seminar on the topic "American History and America's Future." To read an abridged transcript of the speech, go to the Hillsdale College website, accessible at www.emp.ca/ninehabits.

Note, however, it is fine to model a positive history and to show zeal for our subject – it is ill advised to become a blinkered zealot.

- We need to promote history and at the same time honour our students' own subject interests. We need to allow students in history to build on their strengths just as we as teachers build on ours (see Habit 4). So, in project work, we let students choose history topics related to their interests. In class we call on them for “other subject” perspectives, and we relate history to their subject interests with comments like, “Did you see the newspaper article on the 10 most important scientific discoveries in history?”
- We must also address the needs of those students for whom history is their most important subject. Let's enrich their assignments, not by having them do more, but by having them do things differently – for example, by exploring more specialized or more contentious topics. Let's involve them in history exhibitions, debates, history-related theatre, and history competitions. However, I am not suggesting that we restrict participation in these activities to interested students alone, especially because such activities might win over reluctant students to history. Indeed, all students deserve to take part in such authentic activities.

While we are at it, let's reward our best history students. The best students in math get 100. The best students in history get 85 or 90. (Several history teachers have implied that to score 100 a student would have to present work equivalent to that of a professional historian.) My math colleagues over the years have explained that in math there are only right or wrong procedures, answers and proofs, so if everything is right, it is worth 100. In explaining why no student gets a “perfect mark,” history teachers point out that in history the answers involve interpretation, arguing to support a hypothesis, and persuasiveness of presentation. Is this easier than getting the right or wrong answer? The top students in your history class who excel in researching, interpreting, arguing, and presenting historical work deserve a grade of 100.

IT'S SERIOUS, BUT NOT THAT SERIOUS

History *is* a serious discipline. Its subject is great ideas; religions; scientific, technological, and artistic achievements; war and peace; universal themes; and transformative moments in the human story. Knowing history is an essential element of being an educated person. Perhaps this explains why I have heard history teachers say it is not their job to make history interesting or enjoyable; it is their job to teach it for its value. How does that match up with their own experiences? As history students themselves, did they choose university courses that they would neither be interested in nor enjoy? Do they choose uninteresting and unenjoyable options when dealing with life's serious matters – for example, career choice or where to live?

Many of our students in elementary and secondary school history classes have not chosen their courses; as their teachers, it is our responsibility to make history interesting. If you need to look to other subjects to ponder this matter, consider math and science, two other “serious” subjects. Math teachers in many schools regularly incorporate content with interesting connections – sports statistics, rock concert attendance figures, or best deals on cellphones. Science teachers also pay attention to student interest. This point is reflected in a new youth wing at the Ontario Science Centre, whose decor is reminiscent of a video arcade. Christopher Maughan, the designer of the new space, declared:

It’s about us coming to them instead of them coming to us. That’s why so many of the starting points for the exhibits revolve around their interests like fashion and music. We hope they’ll discover some of the science behind that.

Maughan, “Tempting Teens with Hip Science” (2006)

Is history any more serious a discipline than math or science? No. So as history teachers we should think about when it is appropriate to be less than serious and to opt for the interesting and the enjoyable. I am not proposing that we should be frivolous about matters of war and peace, tragedy and atrocity, or suffering and fear. Nor do I suggest that we find ways for our students to avoid the hard work associated with studying history. Yet when we can do so appropriately, we should look for the less serious aspects of history – if not for extended study, at least for impact in introducing topics. Moreover, some of the most interesting or quirky details in history relate to significant issues. Here are some illustrations of what I mean:

- *Choose the dramatic and the memorable in introducing topics and people.* Begin a study of Teddy Roosevelt’s presidency with an image of his toughness – he once gave a 40-minute speech after being shot in the chest.
- Begin the study of the Normandy invasion with one of the biggest hoaxes of the war – the use of balsa wood artillery and gliders, inflatable tanks and trucks, and fake buildings to fool German intelligence into thinking that the Allied forces were still on the ground even as the invasion began.
- *Look for the startling.* The War of 1812-14 took place in 1812-14. Right? Not quite. The Battle of New Orleans, where the Americans won a victory under the leadership of Andrew Jackson, took place in 1815. The peace agreement had been signed, but the news had not reached North America.
- General Washington had lots to think about as general, founder of a nation, and its first president. But how much of his mind was occupied by his teeth? He had one rotting tooth and a set of false teeth made of hippopotamus ivory attached to a wire spring, making it hard for him to control his jaw.

- *Use the humorous.* Tell the old story of the Depression farmer on the Prairies who declared that the dust storms were so bad that he once threw a gopher into the air and it immediately started to dig a burrow.
- Use the Winston Churchill exchange with his bitter political rival, the American-born Lady Astor, the first woman to take a seat in the British House of Commons.

Lady Astor: “Winston, if I were your wife I’d put poison in your coffee.”

Winston: “Nancy, if I were your husband I’d drink it.”

To read more of Winston Churchill’s famous quotations, as well as stories about him, go to the Churchill Centre online, accessible at www.emp.ca/ninehabits.

- *Make use of the bizarre.* The Roman emperor Caligula forced his people to worship him. So ruthlessly did he enforce this requirement that he had the heads of Roman statues replaced with copies of his own head – even on female statues.

For more bizarre facts, visit Britain.tv online, accessible at www.emp.ca/ninehabits.

- During the Falkland War, British pilots reported that when they flew over colonies of penguins, the birds toppled over backwards in following their flights. British commanders, mindful of bad publicity, ordered pilots to alter course when they saw penguins.

To learn more fascinating facts, follow the link to Did You Know? at www.emp.ca/ninehabits.

As you look at these examples, you will immediately recognize that they represent starting points for introducing topics in a way that will surprise and engage your students. Yet they represent more than starting points. Each of these examples relates to key historical understanding. My first example, Teddy Roosevelt’s toughness, provides an insight into his hard-nosed foreign policy. My last example illustrates a central fact of modern war – that public relations concerns are kept in mind even as at the military campaign is being conducted.

PERSPECTIVE ON YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES AS A HISTORY TEACHER

In the last decade, the history curriculum in most jurisdictions has become more elaborate and more prescriptive. As a consequence, teachers are required to address many specific objectives or outcomes in each course they teach. As a result, many teachers feel that the curriculum is so crowded that teaching has become a matter of ticking off requirements.



So what are your responsibilities in the face of these circumstances? First, you do have to address the prescribed curriculum. You need to know it well and use it as the main guide for your teaching. At the same time, you will teach in the light of other realities regarding the curriculum:

- You will build on your strengths and address most fully those parts of the curriculum that match those strengths.
- You will make use of the resources on hand, even when at times they are not adequate, and supplement them when they are insufficient.
- You will emphasize those parts of the curriculum that best match the interests, needs, and strengths of your students. Indeed, this is the most important consideration in exercising your responsibilities.

These considerations may mean that you have to reorganize the curriculum to give more time to some topics and less to others – that is, you need to decide what to survey and what to teach in depth. Rather than worry about this, consider the words of historian David McCulloch, from his National Book Awards acceptance speech:

I'm convinced that history encourages, as nothing else does, a sense of proportion about life, gives us a sense of the relative scale of our own brief time on earth and how valuable that is.



To read David McCulloch's full speech, go to the National Book Foundation's website, accessible at www.emp.ca/ninehabits.

Recognize that you want to make the brief time that you have with these students as valuable as you can for them.

Despite your attention to the above realities, you may still not “cover” all the prescribed curriculum in depth. Accept the inevitability of this. Recognize that it is more responsible to cover key ideas than to cover the curriculum superficially. Then take responsible action. Provide your students with outline notes or a chronology to cover the gaps between the topics that you have covered in depth. At the end of the course, undertake a class review exercise that emphasizes the key concepts, historical patterns, and turning points that you and your students have addressed. These are the key learnings that the students will take away from the course. Where possible, pass this information together with a report on how you met the curriculum requirements to teachers of the next grade. Take such steps with the confidence that your decisions on what to emphasize were wise ones and that you taught what you did teach with passion. Finally, remind yourself of a truth that the curriculum designers seldom acknowledge – your students would have forgotten the minutiae of highly detailed prescribed outcomes even if you had been able to teach them all in depth.

Someone might object that teachers have an absolute responsibility to cover all the required components of a curriculum with equal emphasis. This might be defensible if the curriculum documents were exemplary. Not all are. Many curricula are overcrowded. Others may be unrealistic in terms of resources

that teachers need or have access to. Some jurisdictions organize the curriculum in the way that few historians would, or confuse key terms like heritage and history. When faced with a flawed curriculum, take responsible action – teach it as best you can, subject to the realities mentioned above, and advocate for its revision. You might have to subvert the curriculum by reorganizing it to make sense where it is confused, choosing better examples rather than using inferior ones, stepping lightly over the weak parts, and adding where there are serious omissions. As I wrote this chapter, a teacher addressed this last point of omissions in a guest editorial in a national newspaper. She described how a curriculum revision had changed the starting point of a Canadian history course from 1900 to 1914, thereby overlooking one of Canada’s most important prime ministers, Wilfrid Laurier, who is pictured on the Canadian \$5 bill. The closing lines in her editorial stated:

In September I will be teaching the Grade 10 history course for the first time since the curriculum change. I for one will begin with:
“Okay class, who’s on our \$5 bill?”

(Soares, 2006: A26)

This teacher has a healthy perspective on her responsibility.

A PERSPECTIVE ON FACTS

Another perspective related to professional responsibility is about teaching the facts. Let’s be honest about this last point. A few people with excellent memories, special interests, and/or good reasons for retaining them know lots of historical facts. I applaud their knowledge but, in honesty, I am not one of them, even though I teach history and write history texts and historical biographies. I don’t recall all the associated facts all the time. Sometimes, while working, I sense that I used to know a key fact and recall enough of the context to look it up. Other times I forget something completely, so it’s back to the reference books or the Internet. While my mind is absorbed in writing this book, I have another book being edited at a publishing house, a biography of Angus Walters, captain of the Bluenose schooner. If my editor were to call me today to check a detailed fact, say, a reference to a date or person, I might not be able to provide the answer immediately. Facts are like that. You keep them while you need them and after that, at best, you know where they are in storage. Take a moment and be honest – how well do you remember the facts of history that others might expect you to know well?

What about students – can they learn all the facts? Perhaps they can learn the key facts that you identify as the important ones for your course. They can learn them well enough to succeed in passing a test or meeting the requirements of another form of evaluation instrument. But in absolute terms will they remember them all? So what is your responsibility about teaching the facts? Figure 6.3 offers some guidelines.

Let’s further explore memorizing dates, the last point in figure 6.3. Students’ lack of knowledge of dates is often the measure that critics seize on

FIGURE 6.3 Guidelines for Thinking about Historical Facts

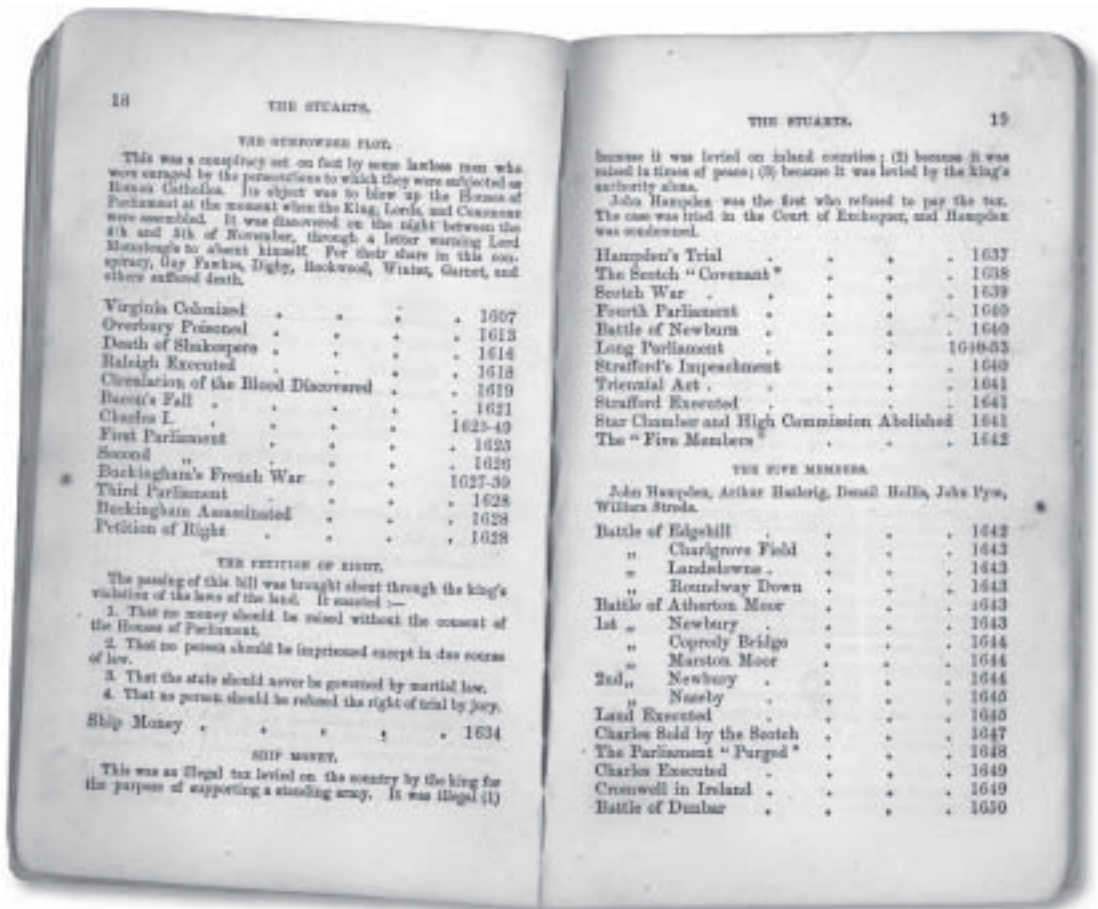
- Historical concepts (see Habit 1) are more important than individual historical facts.
- A general understanding of a historical period or a movement – for example, the Neolithic period, the Enlightenment, or the 1960s – is more important than individual historical facts. This understanding provides a scaffold on which students can hang the facts they know and a framework for looking up the facts they don't.
- Significant facts are the most important – for example, those that relate to turning points, that symbolize a period, that mark “the last of” or “the beginning of,” that challenge existing thinking, or that are decisive in building a case for one interpretation of events or another.
- The ability to know how and where to look up and check facts is critical. So search skills are important.
- A sense of time in history is more important than memorizing individual dates.

to castigate history teaching in school. In a perfect world I would want my students to know and remember all the important dates. When I was in school in the 1950s, I learned the dates for all the kings and queens of England and the Canadian prime ministers by memory. But that was not a perfect world either, because I learned nothing of historical concepts, controversies, perspectives, inquiry, or research. In today's world, I accept that most students cannot know all the dates. Most adults don't know them and still function well enough. For this world, I would be happy if students have a working knowledge of dates and a strong sense of what is important in the time period they are studying. They must know that the history trivia tests that get trotted out in newspapers from time to time, with their emphasis on dates, are not the core of history. See *Starting Points for Teachers* for a figure that helps you think about the concept of time in history.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON KEEPING HISTORY IN PERSPECTIVE

In this chapter I have argued that to find success in teaching history you need to bring the philosophy of history, the importance of the subject, and your responsibility in teaching it into a balanced perspective. Moreover, the understandings you reach about keeping history in perspective should be shared with your students. Teaching history then comes to include talking about the nature and teaching of history for the benefit of student insight.

FIGURE 6.4 1877 School History Text



In early times, history was taught as a list of dates and facts to be memorized. This book, intended for use in British schools, was also used in Canada.

Source: Abrahams (1877: 18-19).

By no means, however, am I suggesting that you disregard new thinking in history, abandon your enthusiasm for the subject, or lower your expectations for your students in teaching it. It is valuable to think about the parameters within which we operate as history teachers, but, within those boundaries, we should teach with passion. In the preceding habits I have discussed some of the bases for that passion. In the next three habits, I further explore some of the dimensions that give rise to this passion – the living nature of history, the opportunities for finding self in history, and the demonstrable value that history offers for life.

- ✓ What “big-picture” storyline or metaphor fits the history that you teach or hope to teach – for example, waves of immigration (Canadian history); land of opportunity (US history); awakening giant (modern China); or cradle of democracy (ancient Greece)? Think about how it is applicable to the history you are teaching. Think about how it is not applicable for some of the events and developments for that history.
- ✓ The example of John Ware illustrates how studies of minorities’ histories shed light on core history topics. Another example is Mary Secole. Think of how you could use her biography to help teach broader topics:

Mary Secole was born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1805 to a Scottish father and a black mother. Having learned nursing skills from her mother, Secole travelled to England in 1854 and volunteered to serve in the Crimean War as a nurse. Military officials turned her down because she was black. Undeterred by this racism, she made her own way to the Crimea and established a hostel for sick and wounded soldiers. She also nursed British casualties in the field. Secole was awarded the Crimean Medal, the French Legion of Honour, and a Turkish medal. Yet she never received the accolades of Florence Nightingale who was from a middle-class background and who had received accredited training. Nevertheless Mary Secole deserves to be considered one of the pioneer military nurses.

See Cambridge Editorial Partnership, *Women Who Changed the World: Fifty Inspirational Women Who Shaped History* (2006) and the BBC’s Historic Figures website, linked at www.emp.ca/ninehabits.

For a third example, research the story of Tomekichi Homma, a leader of the early Japanese-Canadian community in the fishing town of Steveston, British Columbia. In 1900, Homma legally challenged the British Columbia prohibition against Asians’ voting and was a pioneer in the struggle for civil rights. To read more about Tomekichi Homma, go to the Historica website, accessible at www.emp.ca/ninehabits.

- ✓ There are plenty of examples in both history and the modern media of the “bad news” – for example, wars, crime, and racism. Look for examples that show that some things are getting better over time, especially if there is a misconception. For example, despite the impression that wars are increasing, they are actually declining. Interstate wars and colonial wars have declined dramatically since 1945. Intrastate wars increased after 1945 until 1992, when they too declined significantly. See the Human Security Report, accessible on line at www.emp.ca/ninehabits.

- ✓ With your students, discuss David Brion Davis's idea that the distinguishing feature of humans is the "ability to transcend an illusory sense of NOW, of an eternal present, and to strive for an understanding of the forces and events that made us what we are." (See Starting Points for Students.)
- ✓ For dramatic and memorable starting points, see Robin Langley Sommer, *Great Cons and Con Artists* (1994).
- ✓ For more details on Roosevelt's toughness, which influenced his politics, especially in international affairs, see the White House website, accessible at www.emp.ca/ninehabits.
- ✓ For more examples of the influence of teeth and the smile in history, see Angus Trimble, *A Brief History of the Smile* (2004). Provide your students with other examples of health considerations of historic figures. Besides Washington's teeth, refer, for example, to Kaiser Wilhelm's withered arm, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's polio, and George III's insanity. Your themes could include how people overcome physical problems or how the health of historical figures affects history.
- ✓ Another way to heighten interest is to use false prediction. How might you use the following example with your class?
 - One: There is a low limit of weight [of about] 50 pounds beyond which it is impossible for an animal to fly.
 - Two: The animal machine is far more effective than any we can hope to make.
 - Three: The weight of any machine constructed for flying, including fuel and engineer, cannot be less than three or four hundred pounds. Is it not demonstrated that a true flying machine, self-raising, self-sustaining, self-propelling, is physically impossible?

Professor Joseph Le Conte, University of California, *Popular Science Monthly*, November 1888, quoted online at the Skygod website, linked at www.emp.ca/ninehabits.
- ✓ Teach your students the different ways to express time in history. Emphasize that the most important consideration is to have a good sense of where events sit in relative time. Use the concepts-of-time notes in figure 6.5, below, to organize your teaching.

FIGURE 6.5 *Concepts of Time*

Specific Date	(Examples from course you teach)
Decisive Dates	For example, Canada Day (formerly Dominion Day), D-Day, 9/11
Official Dates	For example, UN Year of the Child (1979), Black History Month (October), UN Day for the Elimination of Racism (March 21)*
Decades	For example, the Roaring Twenties, the Dirty Thirties, the Swinging Sixties
Generations	For example, the lost generation, the baby boom generation, the beat generation
Times	For example, pre-war, postwar, colonial times, modern times
Century	For example, 12th century, turn of the century, last century
Ages	For example, Middle Ages, Age of Exploration, Age of the Enlightenment

* For a list of UN-designated international dates – that is, day of, year of, decade of – see the UNA-Canada website, accessible at www.emp.ca/ninehabits.

- ★ What do you think is the most important subject in school? Why?
- ★ In small groups, discuss David Brion Davis's hypothesis that the distinguishing feature of humans is the ability "to strive for an understanding of the forces and events that made us what we are." If your group thinks that this is a valid hypothesis, explain why. If your group thinks that it is not valid, suggest another distinguishing feature and support your position. As a whole class, discuss how researchers could try to prove this hypothesis.
- ★ Use the quotation below as a first step to prepare for a debate: Resolved – we should be grateful for the society that history has presented us.

At their core, the lessons of history are largely lessons in appreciation. Everything we have, all our great institutions, hospitals, universities, libraries, this city, our laws, our music, art, poetry, our freedoms, everything is because somebody went before us and did the hard work, provided the creative energy, provided the money, provided the belief. Do we disregard that? Indifference to history isn't just ignorant, it's rude. It's a form of ingratitude.

David McCullogh, from his National Book Awards acceptance speech, accessible online at www.emp.ca/ninehabits.

- ★ Look for examples of the mysterious in history on the Canadian History News website, linked at www.emp.ca/ninehabits.
- ★ Many false predictions have been made throughout history. One appears below. Read the prediction and speculate as to why this person could have been so far off base:

Automobiles will start to decline almost as soon as the last shot is fired in World War II. The name of Igor Sikorsky will be as well known as Henry Ford's, for his helicopter will all but replace the horseless carriage as the new means of popular transportation. Instead of a car in every garage, there will be a helicopter These "copters" will be so safe and will cost so little to produce that small models will be made for teenage youngsters. These tiny "copters," when school lets out, will fill the sky as the bicycles of our youth filled the prewar roads.

Harry Bruno, aviation publicist, 1943

You can find Bruno's and other interesting predictions online at the Great Aviation Quotes website, linked at www.emp.ca/ninehabits.

★ Your teacher will be working with you on concepts of time. How many ways can you describe the place in time of the following:

- ◆ Columbus's first voyage to the Americas
- ◆ the death of Queen Victoria
- ◆ the First World War
- ◆ the Tang rulers of China
- ◆ the launch of Sputnik.

For example, the stock market crash leading to the Great Depression could be described by its date, 1929, as being in the interwar years, as coming at the end of the 1920s, as marking the end of a period of stock market speculation, or as the beginning of the Great Depression.