

7 / Accounts About Before From Now: Historical Research Methods

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ABSTRACT: *This chapter provides an introduction for teachers to historical research methodologies in art education. Novice researchers interested in the possibility of studying the ideas, events, people, institutions, practices, objects, and laws on the local and national level will be provided with a framework for advancing their projects. To that end, I include a description of those activities often associated with historical research, such as some motivations for embarking on historical research, the uses of a historical study, kinds and origins of historical questions, places to find relevant information, and the importance of the historical narrative. Throughout the chapter, I provide examples from my own historical studies and references the historical studies of other art educators.*

If the study of history does nothing more than teach us humility, skepticism, and awareness of ourselves, then it has done something useful... We should be wary of the grand claims in history's name or those we claim to have uncovered the truth once and for all. In the end, my own advice is to use it, enjoy it, but always handle history with care.

—Margaret MacMillan (2009)

WHY HISTORY?

As a teacher, you have likely often had responses in your professional life to which you ascribed values, “This policy is maddening” or “I love teaching about contemporary art.” Generally, you rely upon your personal past to develop narratives about these subjects and your reactions to them. Your personal history is enmeshed in its own network of emotional responses, its subjects being contingent upon your life and your ability to recall information. Historical research provides a robust means to address these limitations. Historical research can serve as a tool to extend the reach of your limits of understanding.

The term “history” has roots that are related to inquiry, story, witnessing, and recording (Barzun & Graff, 1977). Consequently, to engage in historical research you will need to develop an empathetic imagination, a critical capacity for the recovery and organization of data, and a narrative voice that tells the story of your subject in ways that are both accurate and useful to your audiences (Barzun & Graff, 1977; Kaestle, 1997; Stankiewicz, 1997). To address the concern that knowledge of the world is informed and constrained by the perceptual context, situated within the biological and psychological, and the cultural context, situated in interpersonal relations, of the knower, contemporary historians wonder how their beliefs inform their views of the past. As a researcher, your views will have an effect upon the subjects you study, the methodologies you employ, and the narratives you develop (Iggers, 1997).

Historical imagination, your capacity for empathetic reactions to the conditions of the lives of others, provides

a means to address both continuities and differences. While questions are a distinguishing feature of research and they serve to prompt, invigorate, and focus conclusions, it would be impoverished activity if the only motivation for research is “the question.” People are drawn to the past through stories, objects, lived experiences, and yes, questions, all of which will impress themselves upon your research agenda.

Historical research also relies upon accurate information, which supplies the most durable link to past events. Your readers, including other historians, will look at the specific information, the reliability of your sources, the causal connections that you develop, your inferences you make related to personal, social, and ideational forces, and finally, the way that you tell your story. The history that you write is built upon accurate data.

The sustaining forces for your research will be a desire to resituate your subjects into the world of your readers or listeners. You will accomplish this through your historical narrative. Objectivist historians work to remove themselves from the story while pragmatic historians may insert themselves into the narrative through questions, first person voice, and sidebars. Historians ask us to consider: (1) the context of phenomena as they occurred; (2) the use phenomena have been put to as they move through time; and (3) the ways that today's conditions reprioritize the relative value of past phenomena.

USING HISTORIES

You may feel that art education's histories are only remotely related to your work. While you may not pay homage to the

exploits of art educators on a regular basis, you are deeply enmeshed in forms of authority—classroom configurations, tools and materials, theories of teaching and learning, laws, standards, curricula and instruction—inherited from others. Historical research presents opportunities to look to other art education locations in time to see how teaching might be different.

Historical work can provide you with rewards that are intrinsically, instrumentally, and extrinsically valuable. The intrinsic value of historical research will come to you through your interest in: (1) the objects, people, and/or systems that you are studying; (2) the tasks involved in carrying out your research; (3) the telling of the story to others through conversation, presentations, and papers; and (4) the theorizing or thinking you do as you reflect upon your data and findings. The instrumental value of historical research comes as it invigorates your practices outside of the research. Historical research can have an effect on: (1) your teaching; (2) your school's curriculum; (3) your classroom and school environment; (4) your relationships with other teachers; (5) advocacy initiatives directed toward parents, administrators, legislators; (6) your students; (7) the field of art education; and (8) your artwork.

Extrinsic rewards come when communities, like your professional field, express their faith in the value of your work. Fields, like individuals, develop through both the accumulation of experience and reflection on the validity of that experience. The histories of art education demonstrate that the field has always been a contested space as social forces, economic conditions, educational priorities, theories of learning, theories of art, charismatic leaders, and new technologies have altered the way teaching and learning takes place (Amburgy, 1990; Bolin, 1990; Bolin, Blandy, & Congdon, 2000; Collins & Sandell, 1984; Congdon, Blandy, & Bolin, 2001; Efland, 1990b; White, 2001). They can show us how the field can be captivated by social trends that affect the values that we hold.

ASKING QUESTIONS

People collect all kinds of things, objects, stories, ways of approaching things, affectations, small green things—you name it; people fixate. Collecting data alone does not constitute historical research. The detritus from the past, both from external artifacts, and internal habits and memories, will offer up both discontinuities and affinities, which as a researcher you will put into some kind of order. Questions, however, like any other collectable, are innumerable, so questioning per se is unhelpful. Rather, it is the active and resonant development of questions, which become increasingly more nuanced and robust, that guides the relevance of your research. A central well-developed research question will form the anchor of your study to save you from churning away in a sea of fascinating details.

Historical questions vary, but inevitably their answers come through the study of past practices, theories, and social networks, among other things. Often historical questions ask us to reposition ourselves. My work, which resulted in the study of the contributions of Pedro deLemos, *School Arts Magazine's* editor from 1919 to 1954, evolved through a series of different kinds of questions including theoretical, inductive, and improvisational.

THEORETICAL QUESTIONS

It is important to develop a theoretical question, which is flexible in its application to a wide range of phenomena. Theory or "Given my best guess, the world works like this" can provide focus and motivate your work. Theoretical questions imply possibilities for rethinking habits. Theories are often derived from other fields of study. Art historian Linda Nochlin's (1973) classic "Why have there been no great women artists?" builds upon feminist theory that interrogates that ways that gender is socially constructed. Her question rests within larger theories of natural rights and social justice. Her work in turn provoked a series of historical questions related to the art world, including the training of artists, the exchange value of artworks, and the legitimacy of judgments based upon transcendental notions of quality. This work, which uses theory to pry open cherished values, influenced the promotion of gender studies in art education. Nochlin's ideas influenced my own study of Pedro deLemos, the Latino editor of *School Arts Magazine* who used Native American images to re-image the field. Through Nochlin's work I could see that cultures are constructed through complex networks of largely unstated rules and that people can construct, perform and interrogate these rules through images and objects.

INDUCTIVE QUESTIONS

Often it is not theory that provokes the historical question but rather an object, image, event, story from the past, or even another history. Inductive questions emerge as your collections of associations and objects clash, as the object stares back at you daring you to try for a moment to put it to rest. I began my study by looking at old issues of *School Arts Magazine*. I asked "Why are there so many images of Native American related materials in this periodical during the late 1920s through the 1940s?" This was not the original reason that I was looking through these materials but rather the question that came forward out of my browsing.

IMPROVISATIONAL QUESTIONS

Improvisational questions are grounded in your familiarity with the material and your general willingness to be open to the flood of associations each of us prodigiously produces. Here, gaps are registered and not overlooked: a statement seems out of place; an artifact is slightly different; a pattern is

broken; and a connection is developed. I noticed that before deLemos became *School Arts* editor (1919) his name appeared on the masthead (1916) as a member of the editorial board. Those board members, who were once drawn from the east, had been conspicuously and evenly distributed geographically. deLemos was the sole California representative. While Davis Press used the membership of its board to promote the magazine geographically, deLemos used *School Arts* to promote his western sensibilities, bringing Native American images to American public schools.

You may take up a familiar questioning style, but this will change as your research develops. Your questions come out of your lived experience, which most likely differs dramatically from the worlds of the people in your study or the approaches of other researchers. It is important that your questions are framed to be both critical, such as "How were Native American-focused lessons used to leverage a wider circulation of the magazine?" and empathetic, "What role did Native American-focused lessons play in the field's maturing conception of human rights and social justice?" You will often find that something that is remote and esoteric to you will be folk knowledge to others.

As a critical historian your role is to understand some of the forces through which your sources construct their reality. You will need to make judgments based upon (1) the information that you have collected, (2) the conflicting accounts of events, (3) the underlying values that influence the perspectives of your sources, and (4) events and ideas that contribute to a reinterpretation of the time and place that you are studying. For example, although it may be important to note that a source believed "x" to be the case, it does not follow that in fact their interpretation was reliable in light of other considerations.

HISTORY'S LABORATORIES

The world writ large is the historian's laboratory, although your primary concerns are the lives, institutions, and transactions of people. While there are multiple entry points to your research, reliable follow-through is much more restricted and requires work. Central to your methodology will be a consistent, robust, and specific means to catalogue your data. Software products enhance the manageability of this process, but inevitably, you will work back and forth between a data storage program, written notes, photographs, and other recorded material. You will need to record (1) where the data is housed, (2) where and who it came from (possibly the same place), and (3) the kinds of information found within and associated with it. To avoid confusion, plan your system from the beginning knowing that you will be utilizing a wide range of information documentation technologies including: handwritten and computer generated notes, photographs, voice recordings, photocopies, graphs, charts, maps, computer, and video footage.

As a beginning historian, you probably will be wondering about topics and data sources. Suppose you were interested in a local historical research project, your own development as an art teacher, for example. This very personal history could begin with your attic or other storage facility; it could expand to interviews with family members, friends and past art teachers. Each of those sites of learning has a history, which you could research through local libraries, historical societies, and newspapers. Do not be shy about asking for help from the local historical society. Did you take a course at a community center? A question about a community center can lead to question about support for the arts in general in your town or neighborhood or to questions about community arts in general. Were you influenced by artists on TV, in books, or on the radio? History is an expansive thing where local, regional, national, and global conditions conspire to alter our experiences of the world. Constraining your initial interests to the local does not mean your interests will remain there any more than working from a global concern will prevent your research from coming back to your home. Historical research could begin locally from an artwork handed down from within your family, practices in your school or school district, effects of national initiatives on local practices, alumni accomplishments, public art in your area, changing reactions to populations, art festivals and events, zoning effects on your town, collections and collectors, the art supply industry, local manufacturers, local, regional or media-delivered artists and art forms. All these can lead to fascinating and far-reaching conclusions, or to a rich and developed respect for your region, family, neighbors, school, friends, etc.

Historians use the term, *primary and secondary resources* to indicate the validity of the reference material. Most often, especially during initial stages of a research project, you will rely upon secondary resources to formulate the scope of the project. Secondary resources on a crime show would be called circumstantial evidence. As in those shows, you will need to make your case by reaching beyond the circumstantial to the smoking gun. These are primary resources that are explicit about some transaction that has taken place.

The most common *secondary sources* are histories written by others. As a researcher you will engage in a critical reading of these texts to glean support and identify gaps in relation to your area of interests. These histories can be found in a wide range of styles: sweeping histories of the field (Efland, 1990a; Green, 1948; Logan, 1955; Stankiewicz, 2001; Wygant, 1993), social histories (Collins & Sandell, 1984; Zimmerman & Stankiewicz, 1982;), personal histories (Bolin et al., 2000; Congdon et al., 2001; Korzenik, 1985); collections of papers (Amburgy, Soucy, Stankiewicz, Wilson, & Wilson, 1992; Anderson & Bolin, 1997; Soucy & Stankiewicz, 1990; Wilson & Hoffa, 1985); biographies (Corwin, 2001; Saunders, 1960); political histories

(Freedman, 1987); technologies (Funk, 1998; Stankiewicz, 1984); cross cultural histories (Chalmers, 2000); institutional histories (Berry & Mayer, 1989; Michael, 1997; Saunders, 1978); and curriculum studies (Efland, 1976). You will find that many research papers, and even textbooks dedicated to non-historical studies and topics, ground their work with a history section.

These authors will cite, in the reference section, those primary sources that support their story. *Primary sources* are original artifacts that have not been interpreted by a second party. Probably you will not possess these materials, so you must study them by going to the sites where they are housed. One of the great pleasures of historical research is reviewing archived materials. Such artifacts can include but are not limited to past publications, curriculum materials, letters, photographs, artworks, professional correspondences, receipts, memos, diaries, interviews, contracts, deeds, taxes, and laws. While many of these are retrievable through online searches, travel to sites, including libraries, historical societies, town records, museums, state archives, family homes, local schools, and university archives, is the best way to move through large quantities of archives. If materials are held in a special collection, research librarians can mail you photocopies if you can specify the exact location and document that you need. Although these sources are evidence, it is important not to ascribe more meaning to them than what they document. They evidence their existence and an exchange but not the contexts or rationales for their development.

Still more gratifying are interviews and personal accounts of individuals associated with your object of study. My work on deLemos led to an acquaintance with his granddaughter and meaningful encounters with curators, librarians, town folk, architects, art dealers, and collectors, among others. I recall a particular conversation with a resident of a small town in New Mexico, whose story confirmed the existence and conditions of a 1930s trading post at that particular location. The stories told by the man provided this East Coast researcher with some insight into the relations between the Hispanic, Anglo and Native American populations of rural New Mexico. You will need to be cautious, not overstating the truth conditions of witnesses, even when the interviewee is intimately connected to your topic. These events, however, can provide some of the most memorable rewards in your research, as you engage with people that know your subject in intimate ways.

THE STORY

Historical research relies upon getting the facts straight (the past) and telling the story (historiography). If you follow the methods of objectivist historians, your goal would be to remove yourself as much as possible in order to reveal a causal explanation of why we are where we are today (Iggers, 1997). However, most contemporary historians are pragmatists who situate their own perspective within their

work and see the world as a dense and contingently constituted space (Iggers, 1997). Historians of all stripes develop narrative structures to organize the past into a comprehensible study. Collecting, analyzing and narrating the data are not a linear process. Usually, one enters into the process with some story in mind, or infers some causality, or possesses some facts. The historian needs to delay closure on these so that a robust, reliable, and verifiable narrative can emerge. In my history of deLemos, I started with *School Arts Magazine* and images of Native Americans. Those facts, when analyzed, led my recovery of Pedro deLemos, as a force within art education. Subsequently, I developed future questions about his motivations—perhaps a search for legitimacy—and the motivations of the field—perhaps a willful forgetting to advance notions of the creative self. Facts consequently become drama. The same facts, narrated by another historian, would result in a different story. Even historians who work out of discontinuities and gaps utilize narratives that demonstrate the continuity of omission. Some histories develop rich or thick descriptions of the past, where chronology is less important than developing a sense of place or personhood (Burke, 1991). The telling of this story is an essential element of your research.

The narrative that you construct will require you to engage critically with your data. This engagement will include everything from: (1) organizing the data chronologically; (2) reconstructing social, spatial, and temporal relationships; (3) connecting events to larger world forces; (4) interrogating the reliability of data sources; (5) imagining uncomfortable but possible relationships; (6) theorizing underlying motivating forces; (7) confirming and/or resolving conflicting data; (8) acknowledging and revealing unresolved questions and gaps; and (9) applying the results to analogous situations and relationships. To achieve this, you will need to keep a substantial amount of conflicting and often irrelevant information in play.

You may find that your narrative about the past may differ from the stories that others have told about it. During your research, you may form relationships with people, whose lives will be influenced by the things that you say and vice versa. As a historian, you need to be both empathetic and truthful. Here you will have difficult choices to make that will require both accuracy and tact. Your job is to interpret the past in ways that may confront cherished beliefs held by yourself and others. It may seem overwhelming at first to think that you might have a story to tell that has not been told. Start with a part of the story that you feel you can grasp and reveal your knowledge with a sense of assuredness and humility. It might be helpful to keep in mind that the possibilities for meaningful histories are never-ending. You are making a contribution to an evolving account of the relative importance of your subject, the breadth of the field of art education, and your own agency as a researcher.

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