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BHP TEACHER TAKE

## NARRATIVE FRAMES AND USABLE COURSES IN HISTORY

What makes history useful? Usable? More specifically, what makes the history we teach in schools useful and usable for our students?

Or maybe I should ask it from the point of view students: Is there anything of value in this stuff you're making us learn? Anything useful after we've taken and you've graded our last test in this class?

Or more succinctly: Why do we have to learn any of this "stuff"?

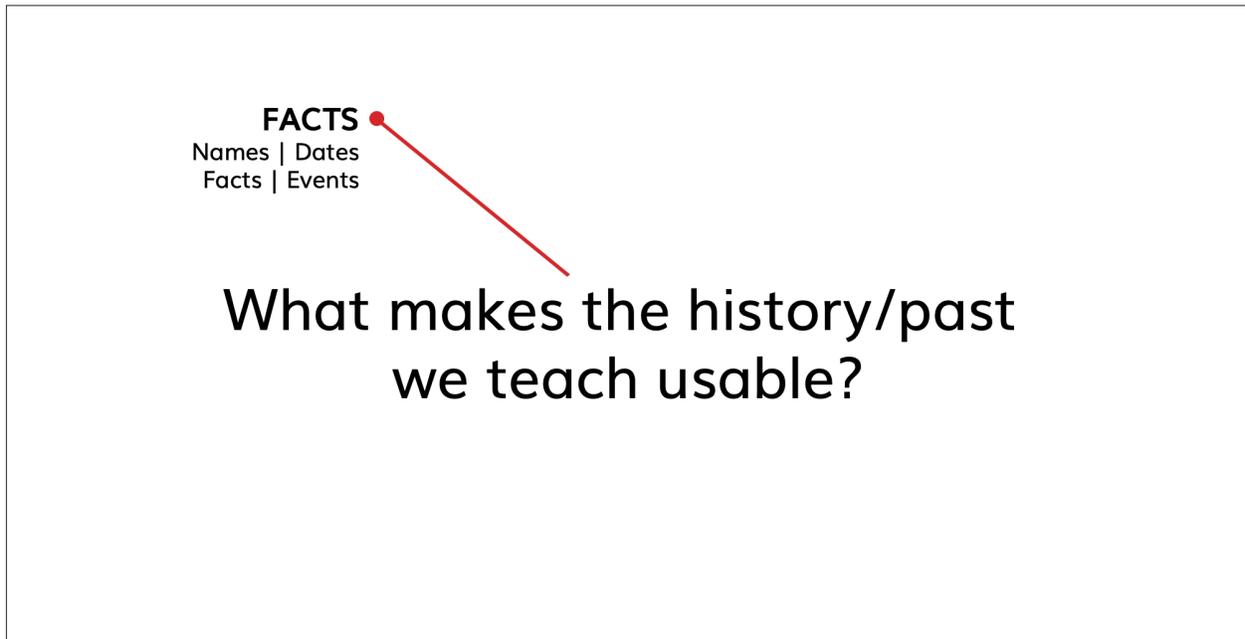
### History Wars

What makes the history/past  
we teach usable?

For well over the almost 50 years that I've been teaching history in either a public high school or a public university, politicians and educators have waged war over this question, a war with frequent battles, a war fought with intense and emotional ferocity between two competing camps, each believing in the righteousness of their positions and the disaster that looms should the other side win:

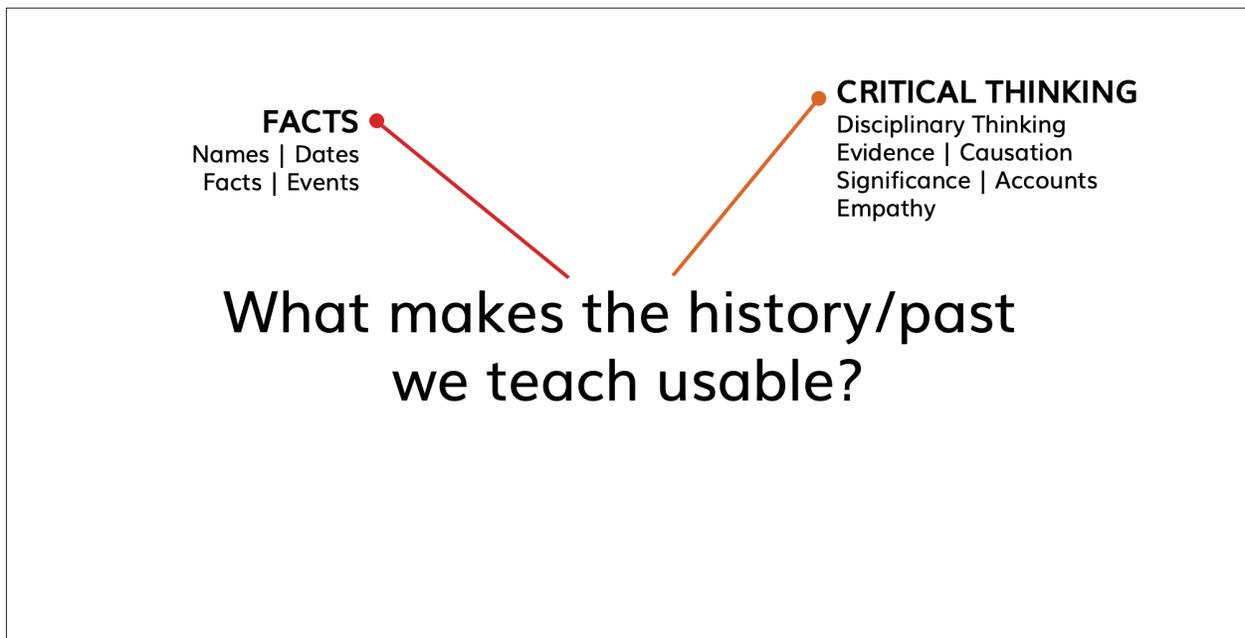
"It's learning a set of essential or core facts, names, dates, and events that make history so important," says one group figuratively marching under a banner that proclaims "Content Matters."

Or so some – **including me** – have argued and fought for.



"No! No! No!" their opponents respond. "Memorizing facts is trivial compared to learning how to 'do' history the way historians do history," they cry, as they figuratively marshal their forces under the banner "Critical Thinking Matters."

Or so some – **including me** – have argued and fought for.



I'll bet you're familiar with the battles, the combatants, and the issues. And I'll bet you've even seen some of these skirmishes up close, fought in your state, your district, or maybe even over your dinner table.

And possibly, like me, these fights are internal since you identify with both sides. Content matters? "Yeah, of course," you think. "But what content? And whose content? And how does knowing stuff from hundreds or thousands of years ago help students today?"



# BIG HISTORY PROJECT

"No, it's critical thinking that matters," you conclude, only to wonder: "But then why teach history when other courses might be able to teach critical thinking in more immediate, real-world settings? And how can you possibly teach critical thinking without facts?"

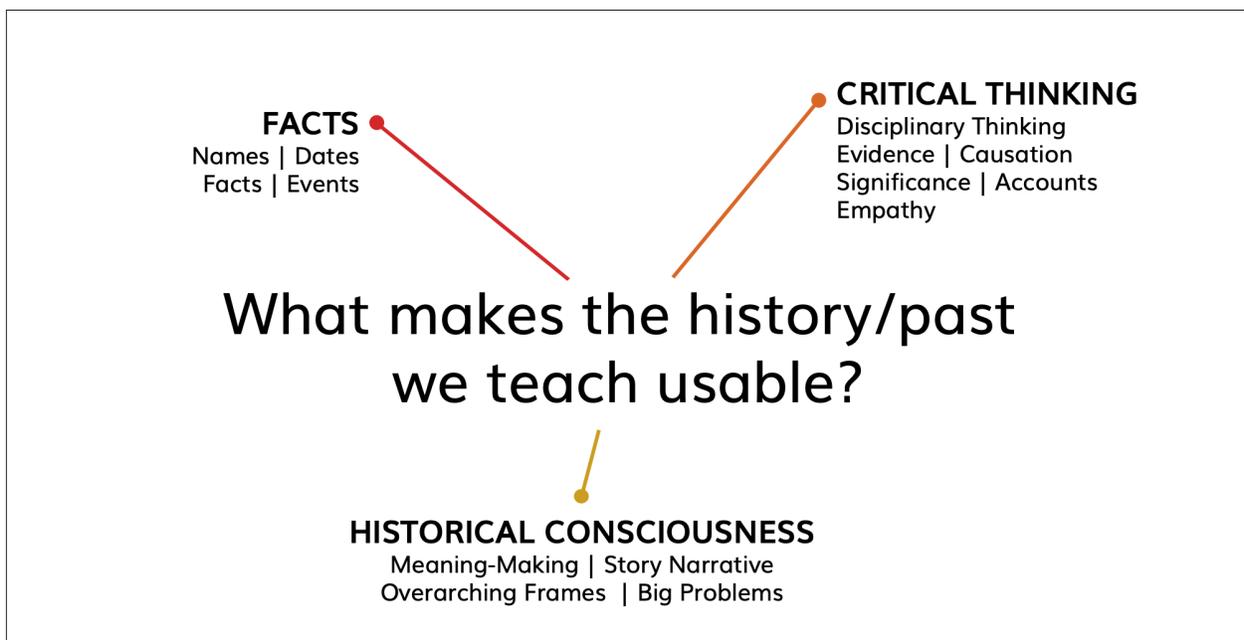
## A Missing Element of History's Value

But what if neither facts nor critical thinking nor the combination of the two is enough to provide our students a historical understanding they can use well after they close their textbooks and notebooks, and after we close our grade books? What if we've ignored a key element of history's importance, an everyday feature of history's value?

Recently, I've begun to realize we've ignored a type of historical thinking -- historical consciousness -- that I use every day and began using long before I ever took a course in history, ever learned a fact from a teacher or textbook, or ever took up the "unnatural" thinking practices of historians. Indeed, I developed historical consciousness when I was around four years old, if not younger -- and I'll just bet you did, too.

Starting around four, I created stories -- narratives -- that strung together past events into a meaningful frame, a frame that located me in time, connected my present to my past, and oriented me to a possible, plausible, future.

And rather than seeing this as a third combatant in the history wars, I have begun to see all three approaches-- facts, thinking practices, and the historical stories we use to make sense of our lives -- as essential features of developing a usable history for our students.



After years of dismissing historical narratives as "mere stories" or harboring an anxiety about imposing one grand narrative on my students, I am looking anew at what I knew before I even entered school.

To quote Bob Dylan, "I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now."

Now, while politicians, policy makers, historians, and educators have ignored historical stories or worried about a single, dominant narrative, other scholars have not. Novelists, playwrights, philosophers, and psychologists recognize the value of story -- some arguing that human beings are "storytelling animals" -- that our capacity to construct stories about the past to help understand the present is one of humanity's most distinguishing characteristics.



# BIG HISTORY PROJECT

"As spiders make webs and beavers build dams," novelist David Lodge argues, "so we tell stories."

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre points out that we can only answer the question, "What are we to do?" if we can answer the prior question, "Of what story or stories do we find ourselves a part?" He goes on to claim that if we "deprive children of stories, we leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as well as in their words."

MacIntyre recognizes that sometimes stories do not merely entertain us, but rather help us experience and understand the past in order to grasp the present and anticipate the future. Philosophers of history call this use of the past in the present, historical consciousness.

## **Narrative Frames and Historical Consciousness**

But, how does this everyday use of the past fit into the work of historians? Or history teachers? And most important, history students? And what might it mean for teachers if we made historical narratives or historical consciousness one of our instructional goals, in addition to helping our students learn core content and critical disciplinary thinking and literacy practices?

Well, those of you teaching the Big History Project course have had firsthand experience with this.

In addition to working on improving students' thinking about scale or causation and enhancing their capacity to read complicated texts and create evidence-based arguments, the Big History Project uses a big story – an almost 14-billion-year story – to organize students' experience of the course. Students learn David Christian's modern origin story with its eight thresholds of increasing complexity early in the first unit and use it to structure what they study and when they study it. Teachers and students use this big story to locate themselves in the course, which enables them to look backward to see the path they've traveled through time and to peer ahead to see what's next in their journey.

Learning and experiencing this modern origin story should help students understand important features of the present and consider their future. And both teachers and students report that such consciousness has been an important outcome of the course – useful and usable, indeed.

