

Grading Smarter, Not Harder

Historians discuss efforts to evaluate student learning far beyond a grade.

By [Colleen Flaherty](#)

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CHICAGO -- A [2018 paper](#) by members of the Stanford History Education Group called out historians for failing to value evidence of student learning as much as they value evidence in their historical analyses.

The authors' occasion for rebuke? Their recent finding that many students don't learn critical thinking in undergraduate history courses -- a challenge to history's sales pitch that its graduates are finely tuned critical thinkers.

Even among juniors and seniors in a sample of public university students in California, just two out of 49 explained that it was problematic to use a 20th-century painting of "The First Thanksgiving" to understand the actual 1621 event, wrote lead author Sam Wineburg, Margaret Jacks Professor of Education and professor of history at Stanford University, and his colleagues.

The paper, which included other similar examples, was distressing. But it wasn't meant to be damning -- just a wake-up call, or, more gently, a conversation starter.

And that conversation continued Thursday at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association. A panel of professors here urged a sizable crowd of colleagues to embrace not just grades but formative, ongoing assessment to gauge student learning or lack thereof in real(er) time.

Suggested formative assessments include asking students to engage with primary-source documents such as maps, paintings, eyewitness event accounts, newspaper ads and unconventional historical artifacts via specific prompts.

Others include asking students to examine a symbol of American nationhood, a local historical site or how pundits use history to advance arguments.

Panelist Lendol Calder, professor of history at Augustana College in Illinois, ran a study very similar to Wineburg's on his own campus, and said the disappointing results held up. In general, he said, students either take any historical source at face value or -- when they discover it was created by a human being -- dismiss it outright as "biased," he said, to chuckles.

Partly in response to that finding, Calder and his colleagues have doubled down on their ongoing campaign to discuss historical "sourcing" in every single class. That is part of a larger, existing departmental motto: LASER, an acronym for Love history, Acquire and analyze information, Solve difficult problems, Envision new explanations, and Reveal what you know. Sourcing work, which Calder called a "threshold concept" in history, means asking students to evaluate the reliability of various historical texts. Who made it? When? Why? What value does it hold for historians, if any?

Calder said he's been known to throw a few fake documents into the mix, including a doctored gun license for Martin Luther King Jr. and instructions on how to be the perfect housewife. While students were unquestioning of the fakes, he said, the sourcing intervention has already yielded some movement toward critical and historical thinking.

Panelist Steven Mintz, a professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin and founding director of the University of Texas System's Institute for Transformational Learning, summed up the point of such activities like this: "Explain how we know what we think we know."

While panelists admitted that such efforts are easier in a class of 25 than 250, they expressed confidence that formative assessment can happen across classrooms big and small. Assignments can be informally graded by peers in pairs, groups or as a class. Slides, learning management systems such as Canvas and even shared Google documents and feedback apps are useful, these professors said.

Assessment, Not Grades

Mintz, who said he has two classes with several hundred students each, aired something of an uncomfortable truth: that the most common college grade -- some 40 percent of all final marks -- is now A. That kind of inflation means that letter grades "do little to differentiate the level of student effort or the quality of

student work or student growth over the course of a semester or program,” he said. It amounts to an “unholy bargain” in which “we don’t grade very hard and students don’t complain very much,” he added.

Yet the answer, Mintz said, “is not to lift up our pants and tighten our belts and be more rigorous in grading. That is a lost cause.” Instead, “we have a deep obligation to provide students with a more accurate measure of what they know, what they can do and how they compare to others.”

Mintz and other panelists returned again and again to the idea of “transparency,” which they all agreed begins with articulating clear student learning goals -- for themselves and their classes.

Mintz said he focuses on seven such goals in his own classes. His students should demonstrate or explain:

- Mastery of essential facts, chronology and periodization.
- Familiarity with significant historical controversies and conflicting interpretations.
- How historians are able to reconstruct certain significant facts about the past.
- The ability to form meaningful and researchable historical questions and construct “concise, sophisticated, compelling theses.”
- The ability to locate, weigh and evaluate evidence, such as issues of authorship or bias, and assess arguments and construct logical and convincing interpretations, along with other disciplinary methodological skills.
- Historical thinking, including the ability to describe how institutions, customs or social roles evolved over time and the capacity to understand the perspectives of historical actors, “including those we might find morally repellent.”
- Connections between past and present in a nuanced, balanced manner.

This kind of transparency isn’t necessarily easy for historians. Panelist Catherine Denial, Bright Professor of American History at Knox College, said she has a mind that “intuits” historical thinking and for years assumed that her students’ minds “worked the same way.”

The American Historical Association has promoted the value of formative assessment as part of its [Tuning](#) project, a national, faculty-led initiative to define what history majors should learn and be able to do. And assessment turned out to be a bridge Denial needed to build for her students. But no one ever

mentioned that to her as a possibility when she struggled earlier in her career, she said.

Now Denial something of an evangelist of formative assessment. She doesn't do written grades but provides all students face-to-face feedback. One of her favorite tools is a primary source analysis template inspired by a Wineburg's call to make visible the invisible processes at work in learning history, and his observation that historians source, contextualize and corroborate historical information. To that list of tasks, Denial added, "observe," as, in her experience, both K-12 educators and college students "leap toward making meaning out of primary source material without first slowing down to make sure they really understood what they were seeing or hearing."

Her "SOCC" template asks students to examine a primary-source document for sourcing (its origins), to observe it, to contextualize it based on existing knowledge and draw hypotheses about its meaning, and to corroborate it with other primary and secondary materials and test their hypotheses.

"Primary-source analysis is, to me, foundational for getting students engaged in history classes," Denial said. "Rather than being the consumers of someone else's synthesis of history, students who engage in primary-source analysis get to become historians, piecing together the past for themselves. It's tremendously empowering and gives them a new perspective on secondary sources, as well as setting them up for the research they'll do in higher-level courses."

Whatever the activity or assessment, Mintz said it needs to be aligned with a particular learning objective. Research suggests that the most effective activities and assessments when it comes to student learning are considered "authentic," or those that mirror professional practice and address some meaningful question, he said.

Project and performance-based assessments are much more likely to provide a "valid measure of student proficiencies and higher-order thinking skills than are multiple choice or short-answer questions," Mintz continued. And evaluation needs to be based on a detailed rubric, he said, suggesting that students may help create these rubrics.

Mintz quipped that students know what is quality work and what isn't. He also wondered aloud why, by his accounting, professors are part of the only

profession that doesn't require professional development. He said that college and university historians have much to learn from K-12 teachers, in that they've long had to meet students of differing abilities and readiness levels where they're at, in the same classroom.

But "a paradigm shift is occurring in higher education," Mintz said. "We all know this. We're sifting from teaching to learning, shifting from a sink-or-swim mentality to a mentality where we have obligation to bring all students to minimum viable level of competency." That is regardless of institution type, he said.

He suggested that this shift will help history enrollments, as well. Lower-division enrollments at Texas have dipped in the last five years. *(Note: This paragraph has been updated from an earlier version to correct other data Mintz provided.)*

Calder said enrollments dipped at Augustana around the recession of 2008, but they've since recovered. He said prior to his talk that historians "have always thought hard about how to be better teachers," but that before Wineburg's work, the "evidence" they sussed out was anecdotal or theoretical. The new picture, meanwhile, is based on "empirical evidence that takes students seriously [and] is not so self-flattering as when our evidence was drawn from history teachers' wishful thinking about their effectiveness."

The good news? "The bad news is inspiring movements for real change at all levels of history instruction, something long overdue," Calder said

In closing, Mintz urged those present to think of themselves as "learning architects" whose meaningful "forward-looking" assessment will be a "true learning opportunity" for students.

Plus, he said, "If you're going to give good grades anyway, make them work for that grade."

http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/01/04/do-historians-miss-ideals-assessment-some-have-suggested?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=05ec395b2d-WNU_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-05ec395b2d-199133009&mc_cid=05ec395b2d&mc_eid=6f67a838c9

