

### ***Beyond the Looking Glass: Bringing Students into the Conversation of Historical Inquiry***

In this article, Gabella explores the use of art—including paintings, music, and poetry—as a potential avenue for improving students’ skills in historical inquiry. Although there is widespread agreement among historians and educational researchers that history is a “tentative...human construction” forged through methodical interpretation of evidence, students often perceive the subject as static and closed to interpretation (343). To determine whether the inclusion and examination of multiple forms of historical evidence could improve students’ historical inquiry skills, Gabella studied an 11th grade U.S. history class in which the teacher “stressed the interpretive nature of history” and “drew upon a wide variety of historical sources including music, painting, photography, film, and poetry to illuminate the human element of past events” (344). Gabella observed every class session, analyzed all students’ work products, and interviewed six students weekly to discern patterns and changes in their understandings of history. The results revealed that “[a]lthough over the course of the year interesting differences emerged in students’ responses to and understandings of different representational forms, more striking was the resilience of their beliefs about what constitutes historical knowledge and the degree to which various forms of representation could provide it” (345).

Specifically, Gabella found that students were able to “generate increasingly complex interpretations of the artistic forms they encountered” as the class progressed (346); however, students believed these artistic forms of evidence were of little value in determining historical facts. These artifacts, students reasoned, were creative visions and thus did not represent the objective ‘truth’ about an event. To find the ‘truth,’ students instead looked to textbooks, teacher lectures, and photographs and film.

Gabella submits that students’ faith in the objectivity of textual and film evidence is a product both of their continued exposure to such materials in classrooms and of cultural norms that reinforce the reliability of these media. These norms coincide with a “view...that knowledge is the accurate representation of ‘clearly and distinctly knowable things’” (Rorty 1979, p. 357, in Gabella, p. 351), that knowledge is a “Mirror of Nature” (351). However, Gabella believes that students’ belief in this view of knowledge and their “unquestioned faith” in evidence they perceive as authoritative—textbooks, film, and teacher-disseminated information—ultimately undermine their ability to engage in historical inquiry (349).

The author offers several suggestions for overcoming these issues to foster growth in students’ historical understanding. First, teachers can diffuse authority over knowledge by creating classroom environments that encourage students and teacher to act as a “community of inquirers” working together to create meaning (351). Second, weaving the arts into the study of history may provide students with greater opportunities to “question their assumptions about historical knowledge, and to engage in critical reasoning about history and historical inquiry” (354). This may happen because the arts, by their very nature, invite interpretation and “make human voice and intention more transparent” (357). With the experience of investigating human influence on these types of representations, students may become more willing and able to explore the motivations and perspectives embedded in “seemingly more objective representational forms such as textbooks or photographs” (359) and therefore may become more skillful practitioners of disciplined historical inquiry.

\*Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 1979.

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