

True Facts or False Facts—Which Are More Authentic?

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Draft: March 25, 2010

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Q: What happens when you teach students how to lie?

A: They learn how to be historians.

It's a safe bet that every history department in North America requires undergraduate history majors to take a course in what is most typically called "historical methods." In such a course students learn a variety of skills—how to distinguish between primary and secondary sources, how to do research in libraries and archives, how to analyze source material, and how to write analytical and/or narrative history. Many history departments, mine included, also attempt to introduce students to historiography at the same time they are learning methods on the premise that one can't write good history without knowledge of methods *and* of historiography.

I have taught our historical methods course several times over the past few years and have become increasingly dissatisfied with the results. My students do not seem to be *really learning* the lessons I have tried to impart. For this I have evidence both from my classes, but also from colleagues who taught those students later and report that several of my students still couldn't tell the difference between a primary and a secondary source! How could this be after 14 weeks of discussing such things? But I was also dissatisfied because of all the courses I teach my methods course was the one where my students were the most disengaged despite what I thought were some very interesting readings and learning exercises. So, I did the worst kind of survey research—I asked a random group of colleagues at my institution and elsewhere how their methods course works and how it is received by students in their departments. The most common response I get is that the methods course is one of their least favorite courses to teach and, not surprisingly, that it is one of the least favorite courses among their students. At least I wasn't alone in feeling like a failure.

Given that historians care a lot about historical methods and that history majors are presumably interested in the methods of their chosen discipline, how is it that the methods course could have become an apparent nexus for such dissatisfaction from both faculty and students? After thinking about this problem for quite a while, I decided that there are two very likely answers to the problems I and others find with this course. The first possible answer is that when it comes to teaching historical methods historians have lost their sense of fun, their sense of playfulness when it comes to our discipline (assuming we ever had such a sense of fun in the first place).

The second answer is that in the increasingly intermediated world our students now live in, the traditional approaches to historical methods—in fact the traditional approaches to history itself—are increasingly disconnected from the lives our students live. There is a world increasingly infused with mashed up content—music, images, video, art, maps, text—blended together in new and different ways. And in that world new sensibilities about what is and isn't authentic are

emerging. Take, for example, the recent interview in the *New York Times* with best-selling (and 17 year-old) German author Helene Hengemann. Her novel *Axolotl Roadkill* is a best seller, has been nominated for a major book prize, and is heavily plagiarized. Hengemann is unabashed by any criticism of her mixing in of content from other authors because, she says, this mixing and remixing is the point of the book, which is a meditation on youth culture in Berlin. In a formal statement defending her approach to writing/remixing Hengemann argued: “There’s no such thing as originality anyway, just authenticity.”¹ One can imagine von Ranke spinning in his grave at such words, but just how different is Hengemann’s position from Carl Becker’s 1931 essay “Everyman His Own Historian,” in which Becker said:

Mr. Everyman works with something of the freedom of a creative artist; the history which he imaginatively recreates as an artificial extension of his personal experience will inevitably be an engaging blend of fact and fancy, a mythical adaptation of that which actually happened. In part it will be true, in part false; as a whole perhaps neither true nor false, but only the most convenient form of error. Not that Mr. Everyman wishes or intends to deceive himself or others.²

Or, for that matter, how far removed is Hengemann’s position from that of Thucydides who explained his approach to recording the great speeches of his day thus:

With reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others while it was going on; some I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one's memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said.³

Sorry...I seem to have digressed into historiography! See how easy that was...

All kidding aside, it does seem as though our students’ increasing willingness to see history as more malleable than we might like has historical antecedents after all. Now that you know some of the lions of historical scholarship have taken positions not too far afield from Hengemann’s, how willing are you to consider letting your students mash up the past? Any queasiness you feel is a sign of that disconnect mentioned above.

That the teaching of historical methods needs to be fun was brought home to me not only by my random survey of colleagues, but also by an experience I had teaching a large group of fifth grade students about historical research. While some might be tempted to argue that elementary students can’t do sophisticated historical research, I am in the Bruce VanSledright school and believe that fifth graders can do some very sophisticated work when given the proper tools and

¹ Nicholas Kulish, “Author, 17, Says It’s ‘Mixing,’ Not Plagiarism,” *The New York Times*, February 12, 2010, sec. International / Europe, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/12/world/europe/12germany.html>.

² Carl Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian,” December 29, 1931, http://www.historians.org/info/AHA_history/clbecker.htm.

³ Thucydides, *The Peloponesian War*, Trans. Richard Crawley, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1914): 14-15.

context.⁴ During the one and one-half hours I had with approximately 70 fifth grade students, I not only found that they could work with such primary sources as military service records from the American Civil War and pages from the U.S. Census, I also noticed how much fun they had while doing it... fun I don't see my own students having when I give them sources to work with.

What happens to these young people, I wondered, between age 10 and age 18-21 to convince them that historical research isn't fun? Is it them? Or is it the course? Or is it me? I am almost never willing to blame the shortcomings of a course on the students taking the course, and am confident enough in my abilities as an instructor to not blame myself (too much), so I decided that it was a combination of the course and my approach to the course that was to blame.⁵

This paper is a reflection on what I learned when I tried to teach historical methods in a course that was all about fun.

The course I taught in the fall of 2008—*Lying About the Past*—was an exploration of historical hoaxes. In the first half of the semester the students did what students do in most history classes—they read books and articles, watched documentaries, discussed these materials both in small groups and as a class operating in seminar mode, and they wrote short papers analyzing information gleaned from the materials I assigned. The reading list, however, was fairly unconventional for an upper level history course. The first article we read was *The Violence of the Lambs*, by John Jeremiah Sullivan that appeared in the February 2008 issue of that stodgy academic journal *GQ*.⁶ This piece, a hoax that ends with a brief paragraph in which Sullivan admits to making up most of the story, an admission he says he didn't want to make but that his editor insisted on, signaled to the students that mine was not your typical history course.

I also told them, on day one, just how I felt about history and fun. The syllabus says:

I believe that the study of history ought to be fun and that too often historians (I include myself in this category) take an overly stuffy approach to the past. Maybe it's our conditioning in graduate school, or maybe we're afraid that if we get too playful with our field we won't be taken seriously as scholars. Whatever the reason, I think history has just gotten a bit too boring for its own good. This course is my attempt to lighten up a little and see where it gets us.⁷

⁴ Bruce A. VanSledright, "Can Ten-Year-Olds Learn to Investigate History as Historians Do?" *OAH Newsletter* (August 2000). <http://www.oah.org/pubs/nl/2000aug/vansledright.html>. See also, Stéphane Lévesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 11. For a full description of what I did in that fifth grade class see "I'll Go First": <http://www.playingwithhistory.com/ill-go-first/>.

⁵ On why blaming students is a bad idea, see Uri Treisman, "Studying Students Studying Calculus: A Look at the Lives of Minority Mathematics Students in College," *The College Mathematics Journal* 23, no. 5 (November 1992): 362-372 and Carl Wieman and Kathleen Perkins, "Transforming Physics Education," *Physics Today* 58, no. 11 (2005): 36-41.

⁶ John Jeremiah Sullivan, "Violence of the Lambs," *GQ* (February 2008): 118-121 and 187-191.

⁷ The syllabus is available at: <http://chnm.gmu.edu/history/faculty/kelly/blogs/h389/f08syl1.pdf>. The class blog, which the students stopped using in mid-semester once they started work on their hoax, is at: <http://chnm.gmu.edu/history/faculty/kelly/blogs/h389/>.

Not surprisingly, the 17 undergraduates in the course took to my approach to the course with gusto. There is not a single “serious” academic work on the syllabus—no Herodotus, no Thucydides, no von Ranke, no Foucault, no Nora. Instead we read works by popularizers, watched documentaries such as *Česky sen (Czech Dream)* and faux documentaries like *The Old Negro Space Program*, and searched websites such as the *Museum of Hoaxes* and *Snopes.com* for useful information about historical hoaxes.⁸ In 16 years of college teaching I don’t think I’ve ever had a group of students be as consistently prepared for class, or think so critically as a group about the fundamental principles of historical research and scholarship. Those students worked *hard*.

Up to the mid-point of the semester nothing we did in *Lying About the Past* was particularly controversial. I’m sure that plenty of colleagues around the country would sniff at the “soft” readings I assigned, but at least my students were doing research and writing papers. It is instead what happened in the second half of the course that generated a fair amount of controversy in the academic blogosphere.

You see, after the seventh week of the semester my students began building their own historical hoax, a hoax they eventually launched into the digital world with great pride and satisfaction, not to mention a fair amount of glee. Their hoax, *The Last American Pirate*, was organized around the senior research project of a fictitious student (Jane Browning) who uncovered her pirate quite by accident. This man, Edward Owens, was a Confederate veteran who, during the Long Depression that began in 1873 found that he could no longer support his family by oyster fishing and so turned briefly to a life of crime, robbing pleasure boaters in the lower Chesapeake until the economy recovered, at which point Owens went back to fishing and clean living.

“Jane” wrote extensively about her research project in a form increasingly familiar to undergraduates—a blog.⁹ Along the way she chronicled her search for a topic, her search for sources, her attempts to make sense of what she found, and finally her struggles with writing up the results of her work. In addition to the blog, she posted several YouTube videos and created an entry on Edward Owens in Wikipedia.¹⁰

At the beginning of the semester I told the students that their hoax could run until the last day of class, at which point we would expose it ourselves (if someone hadn’t found us out already). I think it’s fair to say that the majority of the students, if not all, would have preferred to let the hoax live on until it was exposed by someone in the wider world, but I insisted that we shut it down at the end of the term. Had the students not exposed their hoax it is an open question how long Edward Owens might have survived online. For one thing, the question of who the “last” American pirate was is not one that attracts a great deal of attention. Even with the publicity that accrued from the post-exposure controversy, to date only 7,500 unique visitors have been to

⁸ The books assigned in the course were: John Mitchinson and John Lloyd, *The Book of General Ignorance*; Robert Harris, *Selling Hitler the Extraordinary Story of the Con Job of the Century*; Robert Silverberg, *Scientists and Scoundrels: A Book of Hoaxes*; and, Michael Farquhar, *A Treasury of Deception: Liars, Misleaders, Hoodwinkers, and the Extraordinary True Stories of History’s Greatest Hoaxes, Fakes and Frauds*. The video of *The Old Negro Space Program* can be found at: <http://negrospaceprogram.com/blog/nsp-movie>.

⁹ <http://lastamericanpirate.net/2008/09/03/hello-world/index.html>.

¹⁰ The videos created by the class can be seen at: <http://www.youtube.com/user/janebrowning>; their version of the Wikipedia entry is at: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Edward_Owens&oldid=256742352.

Jane's website. One lesson my students learned in their investigation of historical hoaxes is that the smaller one's audience is, the longer the hoax is likely to survive.

A primary reason why the students chose a pirate hoax was because they thought the pirate lovers of the world, especially those who enjoy "International Talk Like a Pirate Day," represented a hoaxable audience. Alas, those with "pirattitude" failed to take notice of Edward Owens until after the hoax was exposed.¹¹ Instead, much to the student's great satisfaction, the community most hoaxed by their project was academics.

Only a few days after the hoax appeared online academic bloggers including history teachers and professors (ha!), instructional technologists, and librarians began writing about Jane's blog as an exemplar of how undergraduate students could use new media to represent their research and writing in digital form.¹² One of the victims wrote in a comment on Jane's blog, "What you have done here in documenting your experience is an amazing example of the power of technology in aiding historical research. Well done." Another added, "I second [the prior] comment, this is really a great way to capture your research experience and share it freely and openly. It is at the center of the spirit of scholarship, and I applaud your hard work and cool research!"

In the aftermath of the hoax's exposure the class received some media exposure and the academic blogosphere saw a brief flurry of commentary on the hoax and then, like all small stories, this one died away.¹³

What then did my students learn from playing with the past in this way?

Historians are fond of saying that one of our main goals in teaching is that our students should learn to "think historically." Such claims are even more common in historical methods course because teaching students to think historically is the point of the exercise in such courses. What then do we mean by "historical thinking?" A brief definition that I am partial to is by Stéphane Lévesque:

Historical thinking is, indeed, far more sophisticated and demanding than mastering substantive (content) knowledge, in that it requires the acquisition of such knowledge to understand the procedures employed to investigate its aspects and conflicting meanings...To think historically is thus to understand how knowledge has been constructed and what it means. Without such sophisticated insight into ideas, peoples, and actions, it becomes impossible to adjudicate between competing versions (and visions) of the past.¹⁴

¹¹ See the official website of International Talk Like a Pirate Day at: <http://www.talklikeapirate.com/>.

¹² See, for example, the blog of Jim Groom at <http://bavatuessdays.com/the-last-american-pirate/>.

¹³ See, for instance, Jennifer Howard, "Teaching by Lying: Professor Unveils 'Last Pirate' Hoax," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 19, 2008 (<http://chronicle.com/article/Teaching-by-Lying-Professor/1420>), and Jerry Griffith, *Push/Pause*, "Pirates," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RT9ZwINLeY>. For reactions to the hoax in the blogosphere, see the following posts in my blog edwired.org: <http://edwired.org/?p=418> and <http://edwired.org/?p=446>. As a postscript to this particular controversy, had any of those taken in by the hoax bothered to look up the domain registry, they would have seen it belongs to me, not to Jane Browning: <http://whois.domaintools.com/lastamericanpirate.net>.

¹⁴ Lévesque, *Thinking Historically*, 27.

In his work, Lévesque distinguishes between content knowledge and procedural knowledge and it was the latter that my course emphasized. To be sure, my students learned some things about 19th century Virginia history and about maritime history in general, but this content was incidental to the larger lessons about methods.

First and foremost my students had to understand how knowledge is constructed in the digital realm, but also in the analog world. Their goal was to create a narrative built on enough “true facts” that the “false facts” would go unnoticed. To do that, they had to acquire a fairly sophisticated understanding of how such historical knowledge is created online and the digital skills necessary to make that happen. But to acquire the “true facts” they needed to make the “false facts” plausible they needed to know how to find the information they needed on such things as the maritime history of the Lower Chesapeake.

Too often these days students search for plausible information using the type some keywords into Google and see what comes up method. When a reasonable source appears through such a search, they often use that source with almost no critical analysis of the quality of that source.¹⁵ In other words, they spend little or no time “adjudicat[ing] between competing versions (and visions) of the past.” Instead, they seem to employ a rough and ready plausibility test: “Does it look good enough? Okay then, I’ll use it.”

The students in my course will almost surely think twice before ever employing such a plausibility test with content they find online and, one hopes, historical content in any form given the amount of time we spent discussing the prevalence of what a colleague calls “zombie facts” in the historical literature. For instance, we devoted close to half a class period examining just how ubiquitous and tenacious H. L. Mencken’s fabricated story about the first bathtub in the White House has turned out to be.¹⁶ The profound skepticism my students acquired in this course will serve them well throughout the rest of their lives, not merely in their work as historians. That this skepticism has value beyond the history curriculum was highlighted in a comment on the course by Bill Smith of the University of Arkansas who wrote that in a world where many believe that the Moon landing was a fake, “A healthy skepticism is an important part of citizenship.”¹⁷

In addition to skepticism about historical sources, what other historical methods did my students learn? Along the way they learned how to do archival research at the National Archives and the Library of Congress. They learned how to work with a variety of original sources, including naval records, census records, manuscript sources from the U. S. Cutter Service (now the Coast Guard), images, letters and diaries, maps, and historical newspapers. And they learned how to do something that von Ranke first insisted upon—the use of multiple sources in order to check the

¹⁵ Thomas J. Scott and Michael K. O’Sullivan, “Analyzing Student Search Strategies: Making a Case for Integrating Information Literacy Skills into the Curriculum - Technology News - redOrbit,” *Teacher Librarian* 33, no. 1 (October 2005), http://www.redorbit.com/news/technology/290927/analyzing_student_search_strategies_making_a_case_for_integrating_information/.

¹⁶ H. L. Mencken, “A Neglected Anniversary,” *New York Evening Mail* on December 28, 1917.

¹⁷ <http://doctorbs.blogspot.com/2009/01/how-do-you-know-its-true.html>.

consistency of accounts in each source. After all, if their “true facts” did not triangulate properly, then the hoax would be more easily exposed for what it was. They had to portray Edwards Owens’ world as it actually was, even if he didn’t exist.

In addition to learning to work with this variety of sources and to use them for the purposes of triangulation, the students also learned that the creation of history is a collaborative endeavor. They worked together in class, but they also learned the value of calling on the expertise of others. Once they decided on their hoax they contacted one of our graduate students who is an expert in underwater archaeology and another who wrote her MA thesis on law enforcement in Virginia during the 19th century. Being able to ask these historians questions moved the project along much more rapidly than would have been the case if the students tried to do all the work on their own—a valuable lesson indeed.

They also learned many new skills in the production of historical knowledge in the digital world. In addition to Jane’s blog (for which they all wrote drafts, but one student wrote in her own voice), they learned how to scan or download and then manipulate images, how to write and edit Wikipedia entries, basic video scripting and production, and how to find an audience, albeit a small one, for their work by visiting various websites and posting notices about Jane’s project. They also played extensively in the sandbox they were most comfortable in—Jane had a Facebook page and a YouTube channel.

How many historical methods courses take their discussion of ethics beyond a unit on plagiarism of the small and large variety? In such units, students are generally treated to admonitory lectures on student plagiarism (especially copying and pasting from websites) and on such bigger stories as the freewheeling plagiarism of authors like Stephen Ambrose. The message of such units is clear—plagiarism is bad, bad, bad. Who could disagree?¹⁸ But such units don’t really get to the heart of ethics in historical inquiry because they touch on only one, admittedly important, aspect of those ethics. My students had to grapple with much more difficult ethical issues, not the least of which was what it meant to create a lie and purvey it on their own website but also on the websites of others such as Wikipedia.

They also had to consider even thornier questions such as which subjects were out of bounds for their hoax and the specifics of copyright law and responsible use of computing policies—subjects sure to elicit fluttering eyelids and perhaps even some drooling on the desk from the average student. When it came to out of bounds topics the one all the students readily agreed on was anything to do with medicine or health. Too many people rely on the Internet for information about health and health care and so there would be nothing funny about creating a hoax in this domain. But the students also had to learn about wire fraud statutes—creating a hoax that induced anyone to send us money could have landed us in very hot water.

That my students learned to think critically about such ethical issues is evident in what one student wrote in her personal blog:

¹⁸ On ethics in history education, see Lendol Glen Calder, “Not Dr. Laura,” *Reviews in American History* 28, no. 2 (2000): 318-326. On the sins of Stephen Ambrose, see “How the Ambrose Story Developed,” <http://hnn.us/articles/504.html>.

Ethically, the only doubt I have regarding my own participation in this project is the e-mail I sent to the writer of Pop Candy. I do not exactly regret that action, but I do question it every time I think of it. Though I did not personally know this woman, I purposefully set out to deceive her for my own gains, taking advantage of the trust she has in her readers. I apologize for taking advantage of her trust in such a way.¹⁹

My students also learned that creating history, whether it is “real” history or a hoax, is *hard* and takes a lot of work. In the aftermath of the course this same student wrote:

I would like to say that all the details fell into place, but they didn't. We all worked and pushed them into place step by step. It was hard. Most definitely the hardest project I've ever worked on. We were entirely self-motivated in our groups. We had to figure out what needed to be doing before we could do it, and had to figure out entirely how to approach each step.²⁰

But from my perspective, the most important lesson they learned was that history can be fun after all. This was a class in which the students showed up for class early and stayed late, remained engaged throughout the class sessions, worked in small groups outside of class, and laughed throughout the semester.

[A question for readers of this draft – should I get into the whole issue of unhappiness with me on the issue of having violated “academic trust networks?” See, for instance:

<http://info-fetishist.org/2009/01/03/discovery-and-creation-and-lies/>]

¹⁹ *Four Point Report*, January 4, 2009: <http://fourpointreport.com/blog/?p=117>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*