

Forrest Gump and The Future of Teaching the Past

Like fish swimming in water, most of us are unaware of the “cultural curriculum” that surrounds us. Those who teach history and social studies to young people need to make connections between this curriculum and the “state-mandated curriculum” — or face the real prospect of becoming irrelevant in the 21st century.

By Sam Wineburg, Susan Mosborg, Dan Porat, and Ariel Duncan

JOHAN COLEMAN, a 16-year-old student in a high school history class, sat down to talk with us about the Vietnam War.¹ Here’s a brief excerpt from that conversation.

Interviewer: What do you think was behind the war? What do you know about it?

John: Well . . . [Pauses.] There’s been a lot of talk about how the war was purposeless, like there was no cause to it. It’s pretty hard to fight without a cause.

Interviewer: Where did you learn about the war?

John: Just . . . [Pauses.] I guess . . . I don’t know —

I guess it was in class?

Interviewer: Books you read for class?

John: Yeah. I’ve heard about it, too, from my parents. Just people.

Interviewer: Do you remember exactly from where or from whom?

John: [With growing exasperation.] From a *lot* of people — I don’t know! It’s just *common belief* that the Vietnam War didn’t have a cause.

John struggles to remember where he learned that Vietnam “didn’t have a cause.” School, books, parents, “just people” — he remains uncertain. Indeed, John displays an impatience we rarely witnessed during our

two-and-a-half-year association. Asking him where he learned that Vietnam “didn’t have a cause” makes as much sense as asking him when and where he learned that red means stop.

As far as we could tell, Vietnam’s “causelessness” was not something John learned in his high school history class. In our observations at his school, we listened to his teacher lecture on the relationship between Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence in 1776 and Ho Chi Minh’s “Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam” in 1945. But neither this connection nor any other information from his teacher’s three-day unit — America’s role in restoring French rule after World War II, the 1954 Geneva conference in which Vietnam’s partition was broached, the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, or the power politics of the Cold War — made its way into our two-hour-long interview.

Something more basic seemed to be at work. John tried to be the dutiful subject, but his exasperation boiled over with his last “I don’t know.” The notion that Vietnam was a conflict without purpose — or one whose purpose was so dimly understood that it seemed as if the war had no cause — was self-evident or, in his words, “just common belief.”

We believe that John’s stance reflects his astuteness as a member of contemporary American society, as a young person in the know. His savvy comes into focus when we imagine a different response. Suppose that an adolescent claimed that the U.S. won the war or that the conflict in Vietnam united Americans in common cause. Such a person would be considered historically tone-deaf, a “cultural dope” to use Harold Garfinkel’s phrase.² Viewed in this light, John’s characterization of Vietnam as a conflict without cause represents the achievement of understanding. By embracing it, John aligns himself with his parents, members of his community, and many others he has never met.

HISTORICAL SENSE-MAKING PROJECT

With support from the Spencer Foundation, we tried to understand how young people like John “become historical” and how the home serves as one of the venues where this process takes place. Over the course of

30 months, we followed John and a group of 14 other teenagers from three very different schools (a cavernous inner-city high school, an elite college-preparatory academy, and a small Evangelical Christian school, all in the Puget Sound region of Washington State) across a year of 11th-grade history instruction and into and through the 12th grade.

The school curriculum was just one of our interests. We saw the home as a prime site for teaching young people about the past, for influencing the shape of the narratives they tell about themselves and the nation. So we interviewed the parents of these young people and tried, even in this small sample, to hear as many voices as possible. Black and white, rich and poor, God-fearing and God-doubting, native-born and immigrant, dual- and single-parent, the only element uniting all of these families was that each had an adolescent entering the 11th grade.³

In focusing on parents and their children, we wanted to better understand how historical knowledge is transmitted in modern America. What defining moments of one generation are shared with the next? Which stories, archived in historical memory and available to the disciplinary community, are remembered beyond generational borders? Which stories are no longer shared, eclipsed by the passage of time and unable to cross the bridge separating one generation from the next? In short, what aspects of the past link John to his mother, and what aspects — assumed by her to be “common belief” — have become incomprehensible to her own son?

VIETNAM AND THE SIXTIES

We selected the Vietnam War, a historical event that was formative in parents’ lives but had already become “history” for their children. Our Vietnam interview, one of nine formal interviews across 30 months, employed photo elicitation, a technique that dates to research by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead in Bali in the 1930s. Since then, researchers have introduced many variations on the theme of using photographs to stimulate conversational interviews.⁴

We presented a series of iconic photographs from the Vietnam era to parents and their children. To prevent young people from echoing their parents’ respons-

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FIGURE 1. *Veteran at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C.*

es, we discussed each photo serially, with students going first.⁵ Only after the student finished did the parent begin, and only after both had responded did the interview move to a more conversational format. The artificiality of the interview was tempered by the fact that it came well into our project, a time when we were no longer strangers to students or parents. As one parent joked when we introduced the interview's format, "Ah, more antics from the university researchers!"

COLLECTIVE MEMORY, COLLECTIVE OCCLUSION

Of the photos we presented, the one of a bedraggled veteran, his hand pressed to the names on the Wall at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, was the single most identifiable picture to parents and children (Figure 1). All 15 teens correctly identified it. Only one parent, Frieda Serber, born in the former Soviet Union, was unable to identify the photo. Among the 15 families, 12 had members who had visited the Wall. Five of the students had visited during school-sponsored trips in seventh or eighth grade. The students' ability to identify the picture, however, was not dependent on having

visited the site. From the photo itself, it is difficult to make out the names on the Wall. Yet every student knew exactly what the man in the photo was doing: searching for a name so that he could make a rubbing of it in memory of a fallen comrade.

For parents, this photograph was an occasion to remember loved ones, acquaintances, or co-workers: Christine Forjaiy recalled the five classmates from a high school class of 75 in a small Wisconsin town who never returned home; Fred Clark thought immediately of a Navy buddy lost in combat over Cambodia; Joan Howard remembered her brother, who flew rescue helicopters for the Red Cross and was shot down three times; Ann Coleman spoke of a friend who filed a claim against the Army for illnesses caused by Agent Orange. Marion Blandings was reminded of an old boyfriend, a Marine, who returned from Vietnam an alcoholic and is still "dealing with his demons."

Teens' responses, on the other hand, were characterized by greater generality. In no instance did the vet in the photo conjure images of anyone other than himself. When they did elaborate, students focused on the concrete features of the picture. "The man is probably looking at this one name and remembering a friend."

“He has some memories — maybe he’s looking for some friends who died, he’s looking for a loved one.” “He’s a soldier at the Wall who’s just looking back now that the war’s been over for a long time.”

Parents disagreed deeply over the meaning of Vietnam. Some marked it as the beginning of “The Fall,” the descent into crime, disorder, and drug use in modern America. Others, such as Ellen Oshansky, saw it differently. In telling her son how she marched on Washington, she paused and then sighed, “Back then, we had a purpose.” Yet hawk or dove, participants spoke in a single voice about what America “did” to the returning vets. Today’s Vietnam vet is collectively viewed not as a perpetrator in Vietnam but as a victim of that war, spat upon and vilified when he returned. Despite the geographic region of our research, no participant recalled anything remotely resembling this 1969 *Time* account of a Seattle homecoming: “Flags waved, ticker tape showered down on the troops, and pretty girls pressed red roses into the men’s hands.”⁶

The impressions shared by our participants illustrate some of the differences between *collective* and *historical* memory. For example, both historians and sociologists have examined whether it was common for veterans to be “spat upon” on their return to the United States. The literature, including a study that examined 380 newspaper reports of homecomings, suggests that there is little basis to this pervasive image — other than its crystallization in popular film and collective memory. Indeed, a sober examination of the historical record shows a stronger documentary basis for remembering veterans’ ill treatment at the hands of *other veterans* than for recalling their being spat upon by raging hippies.⁷

We cannot speak of collective memory without speaking of its converse. We use the term *collective occlusion* to refer to those stories, accounts, and narratives that, while available in the memories of living individuals and archived in the documentary record, become largely blocked from view in the historical present.

Occlusion stands opposed to collective memory. It speaks to that which is no longer “common knowledge,” no longer easily retrieved or taken for granted. The connotations that attend “occlusion” — partiality, opacity, blockage — ask us to think about the stories, images, and cultural codes that have become muted over time. Such stories are at risk of being lost in the everyday processes of how societies remember and transmit their past to a new generation.

Consider the story of domestic support for Vietnam. As late as 1972, the war, having dragged on for nearly a decade and having spread to Cambodia and Laos, still commanded overwhelming support in public opinion polls. “Seven of ten Americans express a renewed confidence in the president’s conduct of the war,” concluded a Yankelovich survey done in June 1972.⁸ As a way to probe everyday historical memory, we used a picture of a May 1972 demonstration by hardhat workers who jammed Manhattan’s City Hall plaza hoisting banners and placards bearing slogans like “WE HARDHAT MEN ARE BUILDING AMERICA, NOT DESTROYING IT: GOD BLESS AMERICA” and “THIS COUNTRY ISN’T PERFECT BUT IT’S THE BEST ON THE FACE OF THIS EARTH” (Figure 2).

Whether in favor of or opposed to the war, all but



FIGURE 2. Hardhat rally, Manhattan City Hall, May 1972.

one of the American-born parents understood this photo as a pro-war rally in support of the government. One parent, Bob Lewis, responded this way:

Many men and women did demonstrate patriotism even though there was confusion about the purpose of the war. . . . They were going to support the government even though they didn't necessarily know all the reasons why. I see these people as the typical blue-collar workers. . . . The guys that are just out there sweating every day, and they're, they're saying, "Well, we're not the intellectual elite here, but we're going to give you our support."

For other parents, this photo evoked a hostile reaction. Ellen Oshansky's salty remarks anchored this end of the spectrum:

These men are a bunch of assholes — chauvinistic, ill-informed, non-thinking men guided by their penises who are into being powerful, into feeling important through putting other people down. . . . They don't think, they don't analyze. These are people who today probably listen to Rush Limbaugh and want to hear what is going to make them comfortable. . . . It's my country right or wrong.

Young people's responses, on the other hand, lacked such fervor — either positive or negative. For many, the picture was the most difficult to interpret of all the ones we presented. A majority of students, eight of 15, were unable to discern the intent of this picture at even the most basic level. Those who did arrive at a partial meaning devoted more time to interpreting this image than any other.

John Delaney, an animated and articulate drama student, read the image correctly, but revealed that it was something he had never before encountered:

You see guys who've been working in the economy and they're saying, "We're building up America, not destroying it, let's keep on for America." A bunch of American patriots. But I really — I don't know what to think from it. I've never seen it before. As far as it's connected with Vietnam, I've never had any kind of discussion about people who thought [the war] was just another war. [The photo] kind of caught me off guard.

Other students flailed about, trying to generate a context for the image. Luis Fara, who believed that the U.S. lost the war because of domestic protests at home, was simply stumped:

I really didn't know what it is. It seemed like steel workers or something, wearing all their hardhats or something. Kind of like one of those — the big

Democratic Party, they had one before the elections and stuff like that — seemed like one of those. All the vets carrying their flags. But I really don't know, I don't know what it could be. I haven't talked about it, and I haven't seen this picture before, so I really didn't know.

Still other students fixated on the placard "WE HARDHAT MEN ARE BUILDING AMERICA, NOT DESTROYING IT." But instead of understanding that the signs were directed against domestic protesters, they inferred that it was American soldiers who were the agents of destruction. In other words, students transformed a flag-waving rally in support of the war into a domestic gathering *opposing* it. For such students, the concept of a rally and the larger theme of domestic support for the war were nowhere to be seen in their Vietnam narratives. Jacob Curfman voiced the confusion of many of the teenagers:

Jacob: [This picture] just seems kind of out of place with the rest, because most of the people we see in pictures like this are protesting, not waving flags. . . . So I'm not really sure what to think. . . . And the sign "We hardhat men are building America, not destroying it" — like, maybe, they held the war in contempt, but they were trying to show that they were still trying to keep the country going, I guess.

Interviewer: Why do you say "maybe they held the war in contempt"?

Jacob: Just, well, that *sign*. I mean the whole attitude of the thing looks like it might be pretty patriotic, but this one sign caught my attention. It says, you know, "We're building America, not destroying it," like the soldiers were. Or the government was, or whatever.

Another student, Andrea Clark, expressed her convictions with even greater certainty, so much so that when challenged by an inexperienced interviewer, she reaffirmed her initial interpretation and elaborated further:

Andrea: I put that this was a protest against the war.

Interviewer: [Surprised.] *Against?*

Andrea: Against, yes. It looks like it might have been a certain group. All these people, they look like they're construction people or something like that, with their hats on, and it looks like lots of different ethnicities in here. It says, "We hardhat men" — so, obviously, they're doing something with their hands or something like that. So they didn't want to — obviously these people felt like the war was destroying their jobs, their homes, destroying the country as whole.

Students' stories were more similar to one another's than to the narratives they heard at home.

Confronted with an image of a public assembly and aware that the interview's topic was Vietnam, Andrea's sense-making capacities kicked into gear. To her, the Sixties were defined by war protests, and that's what the picture became. When she noted that this was not the first time she had seen pictures like this, we asked a follow-up question that probed the source of her knowledge:

Interviewer: You mentioned that this is one picture of many protests and there's probably a lot of people protesting. What helped you draw that conclusion?

Andrea: Well, in *Forrest Gump* [laughingly] they have that one part where he gets up there and he talks on the Washington Memorial there, or it's in front of the Lincoln Memorial there, and there's *all* [emphatically] those people there.

For students, what most stood out in this photo was a feature no parent noticed. Six of 15 teens commented explicitly on the multicultural hues in the picture's foreground, the fact that a range of white, black, and Hispanic faces could be discerned. For Elizabeth Johnson, this diversity was a "sign that [America] might be more united"; for Gloria Lawrence, it betokened "a step forward in race relations"; for Ted Rowja, it was a "coming together." Ironically, the labor movement at this time was racked by racism and resentment over newly mandated affirmative action policies. Many union members attending such rallies did so, as Philip Foner has written, for no other reason than that "they were compelled to."⁹

BECOMING HISTORICAL IN THE DIGITAL AGE

It is now more than three decades since the last American troops climbed the rungs to a hovering chopper and quit Saigon. The Vietnam generation — those who served, those who protested, and those whose positions wavered — are now in their fifties and sixties, many with grown children. Though the experience shaped each differently, no parent we interviewed remained unaffected by Vietnam. The war stamped the character of their past and provided a lens for interpreting their present.

For their children, on the other hand, Vietnam had already become "history," a topic in textbooks and an item on multiple-choice tests. Yet while Vietnam may be history, it is not the Punic Wars. These teens grew up in a media-saturated environment in which Vietnam-era images became part of their visual memory. Several students first encountered hippies when they dressed up in Sixties-era garb for their schools' "Hippie Day." They heard about the war not only from their parents but from teachers, relatives, and family friends. The majority had toured the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as part of a school or family trip. Each time students drove onto a freeway entrance ramp to pass a panhandler with a "Help a Vet" sign, the legacy of Vietnam greeted them anew.

Every one of these youngsters possessed a rough-hewn Vietnam narrative: how America entered the conflict, what happened on the battlefield, and how a cloud of despair hung over the nation in the war's aftermath. Yet, despite dramatic differences in the schools they attended and vast differences in the culture, political orientation, voting patterns, and religious characters of their homes, these young people's narratives bore a remarkable likeness. In this respect, students' stories were more similar to one another's than to the narratives they heard at home.

Collective memory — a woolly construct ever since the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs published *La Mémoire Collective* — is a different phenomenon from the one that psychologists investigate when they conduct experiments on the mechanisms of long- and short-term memory.¹⁰ Even as metaphor, the notion requires a certain leeway when speaking about teenagers: when we refer to their "collective memory," we are actually speaking about what they have learned — not remembered — during their brief lifetimes. Viewed thus, collective memory becomes an educational issue par excellence.

What, then, are the contours of students' collective memories about Vietnam? For these young people, the players in the war's drama were stark and distinct: soldiers fighting in Vietnam and hippies protesting at home. Soldiers were unfairly blamed for executing a mission their government required, but which few citizens really understood or supported. Domestically, Americans who

did not converge on Washington marched in quiet protest at home. Young people's narratives seemed to contain no slots for pro-war rallies, hardhat counterdemonstrations, silent majorities, or the crushing defeat of "peace candidate" George McGovern in the 1972 Presidential election. The very notion of domestic support seems to have dropped out of these teenagers' narratives. In a curious twist of historical revision, Vietnam for these young people has become a war waged without supporters.

As the story of domestic support for Vietnam has become occluded, other stories have moved to the fore. One such story was the one narrated by students and parents alike regarding the "broken vet," who had been wronged by his government when it sent him overseas in the first place and who was wronged a second time by the American people, when they scorned him on his return.

A key mechanism for transmitting this narrative, for giving it the material form that Halbwachs claimed was essential to collective memory, is also one of the most ancient: the creation of a site of pilgrimage. Unlike the discord or heated emotions stirred up by other photos, the picture of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial elicited somber stories of remembrance, irrespective of where participants stood on the question of the war's legitimacy. For adults, the Wall had become a kind of political "no-fly zone" where they put aside differences to honor the dead and to share, if only momentarily, a feeling of collective loss.

The Vietnam memorial has become common meeting ground in a way that the shrine at Kent State has not. Despite a shared sense that the four Kent students lost their lives in vain, no consensus has emerged on the validity of antiwar protests on college campuses. The question polarizes still. The Wall, on the other hand, may be the only national gathering place where individuals who share little political ground can walk side by side — quietly, saying little or not even exchanging a word, but walking together as Americans. "National memories are constituted by different, often opposing memories," writes historian Alon Confino, "that, in spite of their rivalries, construct common denominators that overcome on the symbolic level real social and political differences."¹¹ Common beliefs demand common denominators. The Wall provides one.

THE NEW DIGITAL DENOMINATORS

A second place of meeting emerged as well, linking parent to child in shared story and image. With no special prompting to elicit viewing habits, young peo-

ple and their parents spontaneously drew on a rich library of contemporary movies, including *Rambo*, *Dazed and Confused*, *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and *Apocalypse Now*. But one film stood head and shoulders above the rest. For nine of 15 families, the movie *Forrest Gump* provided an intergenerational meeting place and a common reference point. Without prompting, *Forrest Gump* spontaneously made its way into nine of our 15 parent/child interviews on Vietnam. In terms of a shared text between parent and child, no other work — filmic or otherwise — came even close.

When we first began our project, we hypothesized that there would be significant points of tension between the history taught in schools and the history available in film, music, TV, and the culture at large. But that's not what we found. In fact, rather than forming a separate sphere, the school often became the purveyor of the history curriculum offered by popular culture, the place where young people first sampled its wares. In two of three schools — the Christian school and the public high school — students first watched *Forrest Gump* in their social studies classes.

The movie made quite an impression. For example, in reflecting on Vietnam vets, John Delaney noted that he "always heard" them referred to as "baby killers." But when we questioned John about where, exactly, he heard this phrase, he responded by drawing on *Forrest Gump*: "You watch the Vietnam parts, and the guy says to Forrest, one of the hippies looks at Forrest Gump in his military uniform and he goes, 'Who's the baby killer?'" This sequence of images and dialogue, invented by a Hollywood screenwriter, was the sharpest and clearest recollection that John had of the entire Vietnam era.

Why did *Forrest Gump* and not some other film have such a big impact on students? Here we can only speculate. Compared with a film like *Born on the Fourth of July*, in which Tom Cruise traces Ron Kovic's zigzag path from gung-ho Marine to battlefield amputee to leader in the antiwar movement, *Forrest Gump* maintains clean narrative lines and a steady chronological arc. Director Robert Zemeckis and screenwriter Eric Roth fuse their character's life to key points in American history, as when Forrest teaches Elvis how to swivel his hips or becomes a Ping-Pong champion and travels with President Nixon's diplomatic entourage to China. Throughout his journey in history, Forrest cuts an apolitical path, emerging as a blank screen onto which viewers of varied political stripes can project their beliefs. By using footage of cultural and political turning points and inserting Forrest at the center (thanks to the wonders of digital

legerdemain), Zemeckis and Roth create a historical mnemonic that aids viewers, especially those with no lived experience of such events, to remember decisive moments from the second half of the 20th century. Flanked not so much by supporting characters as by clichés, guileless Forrest radiates unsinkable optimism and beagle loyalty as he hobnobs with Presidents and rock stars. All of this in a feel-good movie that makes few demands on viewers' political commitments and sensibilities, whether liberal, conservative, or somewhere in between. *Forrest Gump* garnered six Oscars in 1994, including Best Picture. *Chicago Sun-Times* critic Roger Ebert hailed the film as "magical."¹²

One other feature helps explain *Forrest Gump's* enduring popularity — particularly in the context of schooling. Unlike *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, or *Full Metal Jacket*, *Forrest Gump* carried a PG-13 rating, a factor that looms large when considering which cultural products pass through schoolhouse doors. Because of this rating, social studies teachers are allowed to screen *Forrest Gump* without obtaining the normal permissions associated with R-rated movies containing violence, nudity, and coarse language.

Some educators may bristle at the thought that popular film has become a tool for learning about the Sixties and may demand that videos be removed from the classroom. Doing so, however, would merely leave the films rentable through Blockbuster or Netflix, streamed over the Internet, and available 24/7 through pay-per-view cable and satellite purveyors. Even historians — such as the president of the Organization of American Historians — begrudgingly recognize film as the predominant influence on students' historical understanding.¹³ Rather than pretending that we can do away with popular culture, we might try instead to understand how its forces can be harnessed — rather than spurned or simply ignored — to advance students' historical understanding.

Indeed, this is how we understand the promise of this research. Once educators become acquainted with the shape of the narratives students bring to class, they are better equipped to engage and stretch these stories — and call them into question when necessary. Rather than castigating movies and TV shows as educational liabilities, they can enlist them as resources for provoking students to think critically about the history that has become common belief and that which has been pushed from view.

How might teachers do this? *Forrest Gump*, in fact, provides an excellent test case.

When we followed up with students and asked them what they most remembered about this movie, they

alighted on one particular scene: the one in which Forrest finds himself on a dais at the Lincoln Memorial, about to address throngs of longhaired, tie-dye-shirted demonstrators. As he is about to speak, Forrest spies his childhood friend among the multitudes, calls out "Jenneey" from the podium, jumps down from the dais, and rushes into the reflecting pool to embrace her — to the thunderous roar of the crowd. When we asked students if they recalled the scene immediately preceding this famous one — in other words, how it was that the uniform-wearing, medal-bedecked Forrest found himself in the improbable position of addressing an antiwar protest — no student could remember.

Returning to the United States after serving in Vietnam, Forrest visits Washington, D.C. "Mama went to the hotel to lay down, and I went out to walk to see our nation's capital," Forrest recalls in his trademarked Gumpian twang. As he tours the sites, a woman wearing a grapefruit-sized peace button and shouting into a bullhorn accosts him. She herds Forrest into a motley line of protesters, many wearing faded trademark army fatigues, as they file aimlessly out of a parked bus. In case viewers miss the point, director Zemeckis drapes a banner across the bus announcing in black letters: "Vietnam Veterans Against the War."

We suspect that the students did not recall this scene because they probably didn't understand its import when they initially viewed the film. The notion of the radicalized vet who returned home to join the antiwar movement is another aspect of this era that has been occluded from the narratives familiar to young people. A soldier-turned-protester is by definition an ambiguous figure that complicates a simplified narrative. However, it was precisely such soldiers (whom no one could accuse of being draft dodgers or pampered rich kids or members of the Weathermen) — and not the college students who occupied buildings and shut down campuses — that many historians see as turning the tide of public opinion against the war.¹⁴

By asking students why they think they have retained such a vivid image of Forrest hailing Jenny from the podium but have no idea how he found himself on that podium in the first place, educators can turn a cultural product like *Forrest Gump* on its head. They can stop the DVD, press "reverse" to reveal how Forrest came to be a speaker at an antiwar rally, and examine how the Vietnam Veterans Against the War are portrayed: unkempt, unshorn, hapless, and dragooned into formation by a shrill woman bearing an uncanny likeness to Jane Fonda circa 1970. Why do students think they have never heard about this group when historians place the VVAW at the center of the antiwar narrative? Did

antiwar protesters truly look like their portrayal in this movie? Why are students much more likely to know *Forrest Gump* — even to recite one or two “Gumpisms” by heart (“Stupid as stupid does”) — than to recognize the name of Ron Kovic or the title of his memoir *Born on the Fourth of July*? Asking questions like these can help students become cultural critics and astute observers of their own learning.

THE FUTURE OF THE PAST

Our approach to young people’s historical knowledge differs markedly from what typically captures headlines: reports of students’ poor performance on large-scale objective tests. Such tests, however, tell us precious little about the development of historical understanding in contemporary society or about the knowledge widely shared by citizens. Because these assessments eliminate test items that youngsters overwhelmingly know and include only those items that create spread in a statistical distribution, objective tests cannot tell us what is common, shared, and widely understood by young people about the past that inhabits their present.¹⁵ Moreover, by restricting notions of history to the canonical knowledge of the state-sponsored curriculum, these tests keep at bay the myriad forces that act to historicize today’s youths — whether it be *Forrest Gump* or another Hollywood product, a Ken Burns documentary, a school-sponsored trip to Washington, D.C., their parents’ stories, or even the “vernacular” histories of Homer Simpson, the rapper Immortal Technique, or the satirist Jon Stewart. This “cultural curriculum” may be far more powerful in shaping young people’s ideas about the past than the mountains of textbooks that continue to occupy historians’ and educators’ attention.

We see the sweep of the cultural curriculum in participants’ responses to the photo of the Wall. The Viet-

nam Veterans Memorial comes to us in TV documentaries, in movies, in newspapers, and virtually over dozens of Internet sites, including one sponsored by Kinko’s, in which families of the fallen upload digital pictures of their loved ones to “put a face with a name,” as the brochure puts it.¹⁶ The Wall’s ubiquity — its everywhere-ness — was reflected in the irritation that accompanied Steven Vu’s response when we asked how he knew that the man in the photo was taking a rubbing of a friend’s name. Steven, who at 17 had yet to venture outside of Washington State, responded with the don’t-ask-me-another-question pique that comes with having to explain the obvious: “It’s on TV *all* the time.”

None of this is to imply the existence of a hidden hand of some prime mover — vetting the flow of images, messages, and narratives of the cultural curriculum, blocking some while permitting others to pass, all according to some master plan. As Michael Schudson points out, “interest theories,” in which cultural meanings are predetermined by an underlying economic and political agenda, and “semiotic theories,” in which cultural products become, by definition, expressions of the search for meaning, both ignore one simple fact: something happened in the past. While always recast and reshaped for present purposes, history exhibits an independent streak that regularly foils attempts to paper over it.¹⁷ Rather than being taken literally, the notion of a cultural curriculum is better understood as a “sensitizing concept” that points to the distributed nature of learning in modern society, warning us of the comforting, albeit fallacious notion that historical consciousness develops rationally and sequentially through the efforts to create and deliver a state-mandated curriculum.¹⁸

Above all, the cultural curriculum reminds us not to confuse schooling with education. The former refers to what goes on in a place called school, with its armamentarium of textbooks, teachers, and tests. The latter seeks to capture, in Bernard Bailyn’s words, “the entire process by which a culture transmits itself across generations.”¹⁹

When cultural forms echo in rhythmic unison, history emerges, to use student John Coleman’s words, as “common belief” that requires neither proof text nor justification. Indeed, this helps explain why, as a group, students’ stories about the war were so similar, despite the vast differences in how the war was perceived and remembered by their parents. In this sense, the cultural curriculum trumped the profound political and social differences that characterized this modest sample of American households. Despite the endless concerns one hears nowadays over fractured iden-

Got a Question?



Continue the Conversation

A podcast of a follow-up author interview, featuring readers’ questions, will be made available on the PDK website at www.pdkintl.org. Readers who have questions they would like to direct to the author may send them to Erin Young at eyoung@pdkintl.org. Questions must be received by November 10 if they are to be considered, and please include your name and location. — *The Editors*

ties, the death of the nation-state, and “imagined communities,” the responses of these youngsters suggest that a common national narrative is alive, well, and in a constant state of re-creation.

Whether it is Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech available in a convenient foldout edition on the checkout stand at 7-Eleven or an ill-tempered Tony Soprano grumbling about Columbus Day revisionists on “The Sopranos,” the cultural curriculum is so much a part of our landscape that it rarely comes into focus as an educating force.²⁰ Yet engaging this cultural curriculum in the educational enterprise — getting students to think about the history that does and does not “seep into their cultural pores”²¹ — offers schools a way to make a unique contribution to students’ understanding, not merely to duplicate what students already know.

If school history is to play a major role in shaping the consciousness of today’s iPod-ed, YouTubed, Instant Messengerized, MySpaced generation of American youths, it must find new ways to engage the cultural curriculum that engulfs them. Failing to do so guarantees school history’s irrelevance through the current century.

1. All proper names used here are pseudonyms.

2. On Garfinkel’s notion of the “cultural dope,” see Russell Kelly, “Order! Order! Functionalism, Interactionism, Ethnomethodology — Modernity and Agency,” *Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 27, 2004, pp. 573-84.

3. Our final sample of 15 families included four in which at least one parent was born outside the U.S. (Italy, South Africa, Vietnam, and Uzbekistan). Twelve families could be loosely classified as white and one each as African American, Native American, and Asian American. The sample included Evangelical Christians, lapsed Catholics, Buddhists, and Jews.

4. See Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1942), as well as the brief statement by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, “On the Use of the Camera in Anthropology,” *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*, Winter 1977, pp. 78-80. For more recent examples of photo elicitation, see Douglas Harper, “Visual Sociology: Expanding Sociological Vision,” *American Sociologist*, Spring 1988, pp. 54-70; idem, “Talking About Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation,” *Visual Studies*, April 2002, pp. 13-26; Ximena Bunster, “Talking Pictures: Field Method and Visual Mode,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Autumn 1977, pp. 278-93; and Stuart Foster, John Hoge, and Richard Rosch, “Thinking Aloud About History: Children’s and Adolescents’ Responses to Historical Photographs,” *Theory and Research in Social Education*, vol. 27, 1999, pp. 179-214.

5. Given the logistics in setting up interviews, we adopted the format of interviewing the student in the presence of at least one parent. In almost all cases (with the exception of the Delaneys), the interview took place with the student and one parent.

6. “Joy in Seattle, Troops Withdrawn from Vietnam,” *Time*, 18 July 1969.

7. Bob Green, *Homecoming: When the Soldiers Returned from Vietnam* (New York: Putnam, 1989); Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University

Press, 1998); and Thomas D. Beamish, Harvey Molotch, and Richard Flacks, “Who Supports the Troops?,” *Journal of Social Problems*, August 1995, pp. 344-57.

8. “Citizens Panel: The President Buys More Time — and Some Hope — on the War,” *Time*, 12 June 1972, pp. 16-17.

9. Philip S. Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet-Nam War* (New York: International Publishers, 1989), p. 111. On the racism endemic to construction workers during this time, see E. E. LeMasters, *Blue Collar Aristocrats: Life-Styles in a Working-Class Tavern* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975).

10. See Maurice Halbwachs, *Collective Memory*, intro. Mary Douglas, trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr., and Vida Yasdi Ditter (New York: Harper & Row, 1980). The literature on Halbwachs has burgeoned in recent years. For useful introductions, see Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1993); and Lewis A. Coser’s introduction to Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

11. Alon Confino, “Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 102, 1997, pp. 1386-1403.

12. Roger Ebert, “Forrest Gump,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 6 July 1994.

13. Richard White, “History, the Rugrats, and World Championship Wrestling,” *Perspectives of the American Historical Association*, April 1999, pp. 11-13.

14. See, for example, Larry H. Addington, *America’s War in Vietnam: A Short Narrative History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000). Addington argues, “The VVAW’s protest against the war was a more convincing argument to many at home than those of protesters who had never been near a Vietnam battlefield,” p. 112.

15. On testing in history, see Sam Wineburg, “Crazy for History,” *Journal of American History*, vol. 90, 2004, pp. 1401-14; and idem, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001). See also Daniel L. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, “No Computer Left Behind,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 24 February 2006, pp. B-6-B-8.

16. An article in the 27 May 1999 *New York Times*, “Remembering American Soldiers on a Virtual Wall,” listed three websites that provide a virtual tour of the memorial. A good place to start might be the website of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund at www.vvmf.org.

17. Michael Schudson, *Watergate in American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Reconstruct the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), especially p. 55. For a recent example of the past’s stubbornness in the face of attempts to squelch it, see Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002).

18. The term “sensitizing concept” comes from Herbert Blumer, “What Is Wrong with Social Theory?,” *American Sociological Review*, vol. 19, 1954, pp. 3-10. In contrast to “definite concepts” that are amenable to empirical tests, sensitizing concepts (e.g., culture, society, institutions, mores) “lack precise reference and have no benchmarks which allow a clean-cut identification of a specific instance” (p. 7). The usefulness of such concepts comes in their ability to point researchers to phenomena that have been overlooked, ignored, or dismissed.

19. Bernard Bailyn, *Education and the Forming of American Society* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, Va., by the University of North Carolina Press, 1960), p. 14.

20. “The Sopranos,” season 4, episode 2, 2002, in which Tony Soprano is angered by a planned Native American protest to a Columbus Day parade; and “Participating 7-Eleven Stores to Offer Commemorative Brochure During Black History Month,” press release from Cathy Heald, 7-Eleven, 23 January 2006, www.thekingcenter.org/news/press_release/2003-01-28.pdf.

21. The phrase is borrowed from Schudson, p. 64.



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