

The Feedback Loop: Historians Talk about the Links between Research and Teaching.
Antoinette M. Burton, et. al. eds. Washington, D.C: The American Historical Association, 2013.
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Explaining what I do as a historian is often a difficult task. Much of society -- many of my students included -- assume I memorize a plethora of facts about a given topic and regurgitate that in a classroom lecture. The reality, as I all too often tell those who ask, is that a historian's work is like solving a puzzle. Why did something happen? What is this author telling me in this diary? How does Event A connect with Event B? The authors in the essay collection "The Feedback Loop" attempt to define what exactly a historian does, and how teaching and research are connected. The editor of this volume, Antoinette Burton, put it succinctly in her introduction saying "This collection has . . . been summoned by contemporary pressures -- a historical moment when the use-value of a liberal arts education is in question and the relevance of a history degree is something about which parents and taxpayers remain hyper vigilant." Burton continues, saying that the overarching goal of the collection is to highlight the disconnect between teaching and research. Indeed, in an educational landscape in which Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) courses of study are promoted ahead of liberal arts, history has increasingly become a field of study needing to define and redefine what it is. This volume, totaling fourteen essays, does not do that, though it does shed much-needed light on certain areas of inquiry -- whether that be in the form of pedagogy or research. For the sake of this review I will highlight four essays which attempt to address the larger themes of the collection, namely how research influences teaching, how teaching influences research, how best to teach the historian's method, and how to reevaluate the contribution historians make to the academic community.

In Teofilo Ruiz's essay "Teaching as Research/Research as Teaching" he addresses how his own approach to teaching has changed over the years. He also notes that students themselves have changed, saying "The present generation of students is the first cohort to have grown up entirely in an environment of e-mail and the World Wide Web. We often decry their lack of preparation . . . and the things they do not know – but of course they also know things that many of us . . . know not at all. . . It is not that they do not know anything, but that they know different things and they learn very differently." Ruiz goes on to suggest ways of refreshing one's course to include keeping up to date with their field of study, using different course materials, teaching new courses, and engaging students in new ways of learning. He concludes saying that many teachers would benefit greatly from integrating new research into their courses.

In Mary-Jo Maynes and Ann Waltner's article "Doing Our Own Work as Teachers of Undergraduates" the authors explore how teaching undergraduate courses can help build their own research while teaching methodologies critical to the field. Classes they co-teach present a lecture as an argument which students can refute or support by looking at primary sources in discussions, written assignments, and the like. The authors note a moment while teaching a class about religion in China when a student who noted that a painting of a Qianlong emperor in western clothing bore a striking resemblance to a similar painting of Joan of Arc. This discovery lead directly to Waltner and her student co-authoring an article on the connection between the two paintings. The authors conclude that these kinds of moments can only occur when assignments and classes encourage free-thinking and risk-taking.

In John Ramsbottom's "Spare the Messenger" the author describes how with the increasingly inter-connectedness of society, the skills of an academic historian – critical thinking and the like – are strategically important skills for a younger generation. He notes, however, that

the greatest threat to the history discipline is its seeming irrelevance and the all-too-common problem of defining what a historian does. Other fields like English can claim concrete uses -- improving speaking or writing. Foreign languages can claim strategic uses for business or the military, but history has increasingly been unable to justify its existence. As a way to argue against this, many schools are saying that historians are scholar-teachers who engage in research, but also impart that wealth of knowledge on their students. Ramsbottom cautions that this directive comes with several key qualifications, namely that much of the research done by historians does not reach the classroom, saying “it’s rarely the case that one’s current research matters to the content of a survey course. . . Second, is a fact even more subversive of the scholar-teacher ideal: the historians most frequently in contact with college students are those least able to engage in research and writing.” He continues to say that the majority of college faculty that work with students on a daily basis are graduate students or adjunct faculty. Ramsbottom concludes that adjuncts can and should be considered an asset to colleges, and a viable alternative to the tenure-tracked position, and that the discipline overall needs to recognize the value of alternate paths to research and publication.

The final essay in this collection, “Bringing Communication Back In” by Jeffery Wasserstrom, rethinks the teaching, research, service triumvirate as a model for evaluating faculty contributions to their campus or the field as a whole. He explains that typically teaching and research are the two most important categories when evaluating faculty with service thrown in almost as an afterthought. Wasserstrom concludes that much of the work that historians do does not fit easily into the three categories, and that a more holistic approach would be appropriate.

While all of the essays in the collection are intriguing, and are part of a much-needed conversation about the field of history, they collectively lack any cohesive theme or overarching topic. All of the essays are directly or indirectly related to the field of history, but generally only address teaching or research in a very roundabout way. Teofilo Ruiz's essay's stated goal was to look at the connection between teaching in research, yet the author only seems to address the changing nature of the ways students learn in the 21st century. John Ramsbottom's stated goal was to address how the skills of a historian are needed in an increasingly connected world, but fails to define what those skills are or how we, as historians, can better advocate for their use. Essays by Jeffery Wasserstrom, and Mary-Jo Maynes and Ann Waltner do address their intended topics – reevaluating faculty contributions, and how teaching influences research respectively – but, they are the exceptions to the majority of the essays in this collection. Despite their flaws, the essays in this collection would be most useful to a graduate level course in history, especially to a research methods class.

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