

Visiting the Past: Ernest Horn's Conception of Historical Imagination for the Social Studies Classroom

James Schul
Winona State University

Abstract

Ernest Horn, a curriculum professor at the University of Iowa, was known within the Progressive Education movement for his work on spelling education. He was also well regarded within the community of social studies educators. Recent research has revealed Horn's role within the American Historical Association's Commission on the Social Studies, namely his contribution to its dialogue on the role of standardized testing in the school experience. This article focuses upon the social studies methods textbook that Horn wrote while serving within the Commission. The text had a central theme of eliciting students' historical imagination. This theme of historical imagination is analyzed both contextually within the historical perspective as well as how Horn's views relate with curricular adjustments made in history education throughout the twentieth century to the contemporary era.

Introduction

Hope attached itself in 1929 to the American Historical Association's (AHA) newly conceived Commission on the Social Studies. Its mission was to investigate the social studies in American schools and provide recommendations to teachers and other school leaders as to the purposes of the social studies to identify best practices for teachers to achieve those purposes. The Commission consisted of some of the most prominent figures in both education and the social sciences. Headlining the cast of Commission members were the revered historian Charles Beard and the up and coming scholar of

education, George Counts. The Commission was a working body for five years, completing its task in 1933 that produced work both significant and extensive in scope. However, the Commission became mired in a political controversy as it was sharply criticized by education critics for its radical stance on the American socio-economic environment. Unfortunately, this criticism led to some historians (Ravitch 2000) to relegate the Commission as simply another failed effort within the social reconstruction movement.

Recent research on the AHA Commission (Schul 2013) shed light on the significance of the Commission itself. This research exposed the Commission as being a pioneer in the debate over the use of standardized tests in the school experience, which continues today. The purpose of this current research investigation is to shed further light on the work on the Commission, particularly upon the history classroom practices proposed by one of its significant members, curriculum professor Ernest Horn of the University of Iowa. By relying heavily upon Ernest Horn's 1937 book *Methods of Instruction in the Social Studies* that he contributed as a member of American Historical Association's (AHA) Commission on the Social Studies, this investigation seeks to answer the following question: What was Ernest Horn's conception of history teaching and learning and what is its relevancy for today?

AHA Commission: Background and Context

The American Historical Association (AHA) formed a commission to investigate the social studies in American schools. The

Commission commenced in 1929, remained an active body until 1935, and was supported by a grant from the Carnegie foundation. The general purpose for it was to provide a uniform and comprehensive examination on the social studies that provided clarity on curricular guidance for the social studies that teachers and school administrators might use when mired in the midst of a society experiencing massive economic and social changes. Capitalism within the nation and across the world was threatened by the collapse of the fiscal markets and a wave of political movements surfaced that promised to break the conventional socio-political climate as well as what constituted appropriate citizenship education. According to Charles Beard (1932), author of the first installment of the AHA Commission's work, *A Charter for the Social Sciences*, the early portion of the twentieth century saw a "need of a wise readjustment in our thinking and our educational program to a world that has become urbanized, mechanized, and interlocked in its social, economic, political, and cultural interests" (vi). To add to these social changes, another external factor influencing the work of schools was the fact that high school enrollment had been increasing for the first three decades of the twentieth century: from 6.7% in 1890 to 32.4% by 1920 (Kliebard 2002). Tagged with the enrollment increase was a concern by school officials and curricularists toward transforming the school curriculum so that it met the needs of a growing general school population. The curricular readjustment came in the form of several committee reports, as explained by Beard (1932): "by 1922, nearly all of the great national associations had published committee reports suggesting more or less extensive remedial measures."

History Education: A Brief History

The AHA Commission on the Social Studies emerged at a time when history education was undergoing a curricular adjustment. In 1916, the NEA Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education published its Report of the Social Studies. The Report of the Social Studies, often referred to as the document that gave birth to the broad field of social studies education, proposed that history be taught conceptually with an emphasis on current issues. Ronald Evans (2004), curriculum historian, asserted that the Report "argued for selection of aspects that met the qualifications of 'functioning in the present'" (37). This conception of history education correlated with the one proposed by John Dewey (1916) where history is to be taught using patterns that reflect contemporary issues. A wave of new history curriculum emerged in the wake of the Report. The most prominent of the emerging curriculum was Harold Rugg's popular textbook series for secondary social studies classrooms.

Rugg's texts provocatively connected themes and concepts from the social sciences with contemporary issues and events. For instance, Rugg's text series included two key components: the use of what he called "dramatic episodes" and the problem-based workbook that served as a companion to the texts. Rugg (1929) insisted that the use of dramatic episodes, or narratives that connected themes of the past with contemporary society was essential because, as he put it:

If young people are to be brought to an understanding of our complicated civilization, it must be chiefly through the medium of words. Hence, the imperative need of dramatizing the past and present story of American civilization and its relations to the modern world. (Rugg, v)

While Rugg sought to engage students into contemporary society with his texts, he intended that his workbook engaged students in a problem-solving process. “The very center of this course in the social studies is the problem-solving activities of the *Pupil’s Workbook*,” Rugg (1929, vi) declared in describing his curriculum. According to Rugg (1929), the *Workbook* “constantly confronts the pupil with stimulating problems, insight into each of which is important for an adequate understanding of American civilization” (vi). However, the actual practice of history teaching and learning in the schools was a mixed bag.

Some history teachers did not always practice strategies that matched the proposal of the Report on the Social Studies nor what was contained in Rugg’s textbook series. For instance, a 1935 study of a suburban high school in New York City revealed that 80% of teachers relied heavily on a textbook in their courses with the same percentage “engaged in traditional recitation” (Cuban, 1993, 71). However, there is evidence that other teachers were indeed engaging students in stimulating and creative strategies to learn history. *The Historical Outlook*, the premier practitioner’s journal for history teaching and learning in the 1920s, for instance, revealed many examples of teachers engaging students with the past through such means as current news magazines and primary archival sources. In 1921 Jennie L. Pingrey, a history teacher from Vermont, proposed her idea of teaching history by providing writing prompts that placed the student in a significant period or event of the past and requiring them to employ their imagination. For instance, some of the prompts included “My part in the French Revolution” and “When I helped Alexander the Great to conquer Asia” (Pingrey, 1921, 295). This example illustrates the fact that historical imagination was something

some history teachers were already emphasizing. It may be presumed, therefore, that Ernest Horn’s conception of historical imagination was influenced by the practices of such teachers that he either knew or read about when he wrote his methods text.

Ernest Horn and the Progressive Era

Ernest Horn was born in 1882. He majored in elementary education at the University of Missouri and was appointed as principal of the university’s first laboratory elementary school at the completion of his junior year. This was the genesis of what would be a long and successful career as a curriculum professor. After some initial experience in the professoriate at Colorado State University, Horn moved toward advanced graduate studies at Columbia University Teachers College where he earned his PhD in 1915. At the conclusion of his time at Columbia, he accepted a position as professor at The University of Iowa College of Education, where he would spend his remaining professional career (Stein, 1973). While at Iowa, Horn established The University of Iowa Elementary School, a school well known for nurturing inquiry-based instruction among its in-service and preservice teachers. Horn’s research focused on spelling instruction where he aimed to decipher which words were most commonly used in life outside the school (Stein, 1973).

Although he was best known for his work on spelling education, Horn’s educational interests and influence spread wide, particularly with the area of social studies education. A longtime member of the National Council for the Social Studies, Horn was greatly interested in the issue of moral education within the public schools (Schul & Hamot, 2011). Horn believed that moral education should be taught through cases where the teacher would guide students through

the moral issues related to those cases. These cases revolved mostly around issues of property rights and sought to position the student to consider the perspective, right, and responsibility of the property owner and property user. Horn's interest in social studies education led to his selection as one of the members of the AHA Commission on the Social Studies. While Horn's contribution to the controversy surrounding testing that surfaced around the AHA Commission has been investigated

(Schul, 2013), his explicit contribution to its work has not. Horn's direct contribution to the commission was a social studies methods book titled *Methods of Instruction in the Social Studies* (1937). The text reveals Horn's meticulous concern for detail and his ongoing focus on the pragmatic with regard to public education.

The Text: Methods of Instruction in the Social Studies

The methods text produced by Horn for the Commission was exhaustive on many fronts and could be the source of multiple research investigations. It was underpinned theoretically with the connection between instructional method and social purpose, subject matter, and nature of the learner. Horn included provocative sections about indoctrination and propaganda that asked such questions as: Shall the schools have a social program? Shall controversial issues be taught? Shall the schools teach pupils how to think or what to think? A section entitled "Reading in Relation to Learning in the Social Studies" examined issues such as the relationship of a students' intelligence, interest, and experience to reading. Additionally, the methods text examined the use of a textbook in correlation to other tools at a teacher's disposal such as oral instruction, the radio, visual aids, museums, and dramatization.

Imbedded throughout the methods book, particularly with regard to the sections that emphasized reading and instructional strategies is the theme of imagination. As a case in point, one of the latter sections of the book entitled "Devices for Stimulating the Imagination" emphasized the use of graphic aids, and dramatization as a means to evoke students' imagination. Within this section, a chapter entitled "The Imaginary Journey" focused on imaginary trips a teacher may position students to take, as a means to better understand the concepts of a particular geographic region or era of the past. Rather than provide multiple examples of possible imaginary journeys, Horn (1937) spent the bulk of the chapter on warnings about employing such a strategy and he shared his concerns that many teachers tend to focus too much on the journey itself, as he explained is a misstep often made in geography courses:

... the fundamental concepts are commonly obscured by the great amount of emphasis given to buying imaginary tickets, to making passports, to dramatizing the inoculation against diseases, to packing American flags in 'little imaginary suitcases,' to ringing bells, to blowing whistles, to shouting and waving good-bys as the boat or train departs, to tipping the porter, to making paper trains that steam 'joyously across the desert,' to keeping diaries of the imagined trip, to writing letters home, and to carving souvenirs out of soap. (Horn, 1937, 466)

Horn (1937) categorized such activities as "intellectual sloppiness" because it emphasizes an interest in the journey itself rather than "the interest developed in basic geographical and

social problems” (469). Horn saw potential with instructional strategies that employed students’ imagination as long the teacher emphasized the teaching of subject matter with the strategy rather than the strategy having a life of its own.

A common theme throughout Horn’s methods book was its analysis of benefits and disadvantages of various classroom practices. One of Horn’s most significant analyses of classroom practices, which he provided in his text, was the use of the textbook in relation to other reading material that teachers may have at their disposal.

Integrating Literature into the History Curriculum

Horn conceded that textbooks were going to remain in the school experience. In his text, he cited research that revealed the dominance of the textbook in the American classroom. However, he also recognized that the ideas of the Progressive education movement were gaining some traction in some classrooms: “There are, however, an increasing number of school systems, as indicated by the available courses of study, in which the textbook is regarded as an introductory manual to be used with classroom libraries and other equipment” (Horn, 1937, 209). Horn proceeded in his methods book to critique textbooks by providing numerous deficiencies of their use, including their poor reading quality, students’ own poor reading ability, a lack of visuals such as maps and pictures, and their lack of treatment of contemporary social issues. Horn went on to provide guidance for teachers in how they should use the text. He valued the text for providing an outline of the course of study for both teachers and pupils, their inclusion of lists of questions and supplemental reading suggestions, and the summary of a topic or time-period that students may use for review as they seek to better

understand the concepts and generalizations taught to them by their teacher. But, for the most part, Horn envisioned the textbook as a curricular resource and not the dominant influence in the curriculum. Horn (1937) was skeptical of the use of workbooks in the classroom as he feared that most of them contained “many exercises that are little better than busywork” and that they often “increase rather than to offset the formalism and verbalism that, in the past, have pervaded the teaching of the social studies” (222).

Horn (1937) believed that “dynamic teaching centers upon ideas rather than upon books” (223). With that said, Horn believed that no single text could effectively address historical and contemporary problems that students should seek to address in their courses. It is for this reason that Horn believed teachers should include what he called *collateral* readings (although he was not comfortable with the term *collateral* since it signals a deference to the textbook). Horn’s rationale for employing collateral readings in the history classroom, as you will see, ran parallel with his reasoning with strengths associated with employing historical fiction in the classroom (see Table 1). He believed that additional readings were necessary with eliciting curiosity and students’ use of imagination in their learning about the past. Horn (1937) also suggested that employing literature in the history classroom offered a clear opportunity for history teachers to engage in interdisciplinary partnerships with literature teachers as “each enriches and supplements the other: literature in giving a sense of atmosphere, and history in providing authentic factual background of the period or conditions” (291). The most prominent area of the methods book that emphasized the employment of students’ imaginations was the section entitled “The Use of Imaginative Literature.”

Table 1. Ernest Horn’s Analysis of Historical Fiction in the History Classroom

Strengths	Weaknesses
Gives atmosphere	Inadequacy of sources used to reconstruct the past
Shows more vividly and intimately the bearings of past conditions upon the people	The distortion and false color caused by interpreting the past from the point of view of the writer’s own time
Enables the reader to enter imaginatively into the experiences of past times	The bias of a limited point of view or purpose
Stimulates an interest in historical study	The necessity for meeting the demands of a well-rounded plot even though historical data are lacking

Horn used this chapter to explain his conception of the relationship between history and literature, particularly fiction and historical fiction. The following section illuminates Horn’s conception of what we will term the historical imagination.

Horn and Historical Imagination

Ernest Horn’s interest with employing historical fiction as a means to teach history had a practical purpose. “The intellectual diet of the average reader – either immature or adult – contains little social knowledge that is substantial or scholarly” combined with “the dominance of fiction in the leisure-time reading of both children and adults” (Horn, 1937, 265) made it apparent that fiction may be an effective means to attract students’ interest in the social problems in history. Horn categorized fiction appropriate for the history classroom into two types: contemporary fiction and historical fiction. Contemporary fiction, according to Horn, was

written by an author who “consciously or unconsciously, deals with what is going on in his own time” (269). Horn provided Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as an example of contemporary fiction. Historical fiction, according to Horn, was written by an author who “reconstructs or refers to the events, persons, or manners of a former time” (269). Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* was provided as an example of historical fiction.

As was customary for Horn in his methods book, he spent a considerable amount of effort warning the teacher of pitfalls with employing literature to teach history. For instance, Horn warned that bias of the author can sometimes be very strong in works of fiction and the reader must be on guard for this. Horn later conceded that general histories also contain bias. Horn (1937) went on to provide a series of guiding questions for those teachers who chose to employ “imaginative writing” into their classroom:

He should have in mind especially the distinction between contemporary and historical fiction and should realize why, in general, contemporary fiction is preferred by the historian. He should understand the difference between the purposes and methods of history and fiction. He should know that portrayals may be vividly impressive and yet be false. He should be aware that the language, the points of view, and the sentiments of a historical novel are likely to be of the time of the writer rather than of the period treated. He should be critical of the limited horizon or the personal bias of the writer. Above all, he should understand that the child, even more than the adult, is not in a position

to tell what is authentic and what is either imaginary or erroneous (291-292).

Horn sought to provide a balanced overview of the strengths and weaknesses with employing historical fiction into the history classroom. In many ways this analysis of the dichotomy of strengths and weaknesses encompass the aforementioned questions that Horn asked as a means to warn the teacher. Again, the weaknesses espoused by Horn focused mostly on the inaccuracy and bias of the author much as he warned with his series of questions to teachers. The strengths centered on the lure of historical fiction to engaging the reader into experiences and issues of the past.

A correspondence ensued between Horn and A.C. Krey, just before the publication of the methods text that focused on Horn's inclusion of imaginative literature as a means to teach history in the social studies curriculum. Krey (1936a), a prominent ancient historian from the University of Minnesota and the chairperson of the AHA Commission, praised Horn for providing "excellent concrete illustrations developed sufficiently for to give the teacher a realizing sense of what is involved." He praised Horn for his dichotomization of historical fiction and contemporary fiction. Krey, however, wanted Horn to emphasize how the characteristics of historical fiction depart from the conventional history textbook in engaging students with the past:

There is a certain value in the historical fiction, shared to some extent by fiction in general, which the ordinary textbook treatment of history fails to yield. The latter is too generalized, too far away from the ordinary, practical details of life to give the pupil any sense of the

reality or vitality of history (Krey 1936b).

Krey found a kindred spirit in Horn who sought to make students' history experience engaging, meaningful, and impactful. Krey went on to suggest pieces of historical fiction, such as William Stearns Davis' *A Day in Old Athens* (1914) or his *Life on a Mediaeval Barony* (1923) as well as Rudyard Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) as examples of historical fiction that "convey some impression of the culture pattern of the age with a vividness that helps to link the generalized material of the textbook to life in fact as the pupil actually knows it" (Krey 1936b). Horn included the lone example of Davis' *A Day in Old Athens* into his chapter entitled "The Textbook and Collateral Reading" that actually preceded the aforementioned chapter entitled "The Use of Imaginative Literature" and served as a backdrop of how Horn envisioned teachers may practically fit supplemental (or collateral, as Horn called them) within their instructional repertoire.

History Education Since Horn

Ernest Horn wrote about historical imagination in 1937 with a primary concern for the educational process that contributed to students' interest in history and the affective objectives of history that would position the student to envision and explore the past. In sum, Horn was interested in the life of the mind. There have been numerous trends in history education since Horn wrote his methods book. Curriculum reform in the 1950s was influenced by criticisms of the progressive movement, spurred by aspects of the Cold War, which led to a return to academic disciplines in social studies courses (Evans 2004). This meant that history education, for instance, included less emphasis on

contemporary social problems and more emphasis on a distinct study of the narrative of the past. The *New Social Studies* movement emerged in the 1960s with the aim to “transform ... students into junior historians and social scientists” (Evans 2004, 123). At this time Edwin Fenton, a historian at Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh, began developing curriculum that included an employment of primary sources in middle and secondary history classrooms. Teachers, influenced by Fenton’s work, widely used a popular series of primary source packets entitled *JackDaws* that were widely used across the nation. The standards movement of the 1990s and 2000s placed an emphasis on the academic outcomes of teacher instruction. History education, as a result, emphasized students’ learning of facts and a reemphasis upon the narrative of the past. However, a reform movement entitled historical thinking, led by Sam Wineburg (1991) arose simultaneously with the standards movement. Historical thinking, like the *New Social Studies* movement of the 1960s, emphasized student interpretation of primary sources as a means to learn history. Disciplinary thinking became the objective of historical thinking. History educators such as Keith Barton and Linda Levstik (2004) began to emphasize the affective objectives that learning history through primary sources may include, most notably the development of students’ historical empathy (an individual’s ability to understand the thoughts and feelings of those who lived in the past). This contemporary emphasis on historical thinking as a means to develop empathy resembles some of the objectives that Horn envisioned with integrating imaginative literature as a means to teach history.

Horn’s emphasis on imagination as a key component of history teaching and learning has its roots in the philosophy of history. R.G. Collingwood (1946), the renowned philosopher of

history, said nearly a decade after Horn’s methods book that “every present has a past of its own, and any imaginative reconstruction of the past aims at reconstructing the past of this present” (247). Horn’s suggestion of employing historical fiction and other types of what he called “imaginative literature” positions students to reconstruct the past using their imagination. Although Horn focused primarily on students’ consumption of fiction as a means to engage their historical imagination, a line can easily be drawn to how students writing their own tales of history may further employ historical imagination.

Horn’s suggestion of employing fiction in the history classroom may have been thought of, at the time of the publication of the methods text, to be a strategy exclusive to garner interest in history for the student in school and less necessary for the serious historian. However, in recent times, some historians have asserted that imagination plays a more central role in construction of the past than what other historians may be willing to admit. History educator David Staley (2007), for instance, asserted that history is an “imaginative discipline, in that much of the work occurs in the ‘staging area’ or ‘workspace’ of the imagination, and is only then made external when we transcribe that product of our imagination into words” (101). Staley (2007) elaborated further on the significant role that imagination plays in the construction of history in that it “allows our minds to recombine, juxtapose, invent, and create in novel ways” (102). Likewise, Horn envisioned students experiencing the past as a means to better understand it because it frees the students to reflect and create their own conception of the past– and subsequently apply it to issues surrounding the students’ contemporary times. Horn deserves some credit for lining up his methods text, written nearly eighty years ago, with what some history educators are currently

striving to have unleashed more often in contemporary classrooms. Horn's emphasis on imagination in history teaching and learning is indicative of the progressive era's emphasis on classroom practices that empower students to connect their own experiences to what they are learning. Imaginative literature, according to Horn, fostered such experiences for the students and enabled them to have an encounter with the past that was lasting and useful in their life. In many ways, this affective purpose for history teaching and learning that Horn had nearly eighty years ago is still relevant for history teachers today who aspire to foster a love of history in their own students' lives.

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