

Doing History



Carol Berkin

How the worlds of the scholar and the popular historian come together

Common-place asks Berkin to write about how her approach to scholarship and teaching changed as she became involved in public history.

John Edwards may be the star of the TV show *Crossing Over*, but my experiences have been as revelatory as his—and far less reliant on the spirit world. Over the past two decades, I have ventured into the world outside the ivy-covered halls of academe, spending a considerable amount of my time running institutes for teachers, giving public lectures, appearing as a “talking head” in documentaries, and writing trade books designed for what publicists call the “intelligent layperson” rather than for my colleagues in the profession of history. Although my entrance into these fields of what is commonly (and often sneeringly) called popular history was unplanned and serendipitous, I am deeply grateful for the experience. Aside from the fame (I was once recognized in a discount shoe store by an earnest young woman who had seen me in a documentary and asked me to autograph her shoe box) and the fortune (I now only owe an arm and a leg to my children’s colleges), popular or public history has taught me much about my chosen profession of teaching and my chosen field of research, early American history.

I share my thoughts with some trepidation. Not everyone will agree with what I have to say, and no doubt many of the insights I believe this work has given me will seem to be obvious to others. But, having been asked to write this piece and being of an age to be reckless and fearless, I forge ahead.

When I first started out in academia, here is how I understood the relationship between my field and the outside world: In my mind, there was an “us” and a “them,” and if we in the academy were not exactly a secret society, we were a select group set apart from others by our craft. In dealing with “them” it was important to sound smarter and to make clear that I possessed a body of arcane knowledge that marked me as a skilled practitioner of the esoteric craft of archival research. To the general public, I hoped to appear as a high priestess of the arcane; to students, I wanted to seem the bearer of wisdom and the judge of competence. Knowing something that others did not know mattered; but the real prize was understanding something my students and the lay person could never hope to understand as well as I. While this philosophy might be blamed on callow youthfulness or neurotic insecurity, I fear it might have continued to guide me right through my AARP membership had I not been thrust into the world of popular history.

What did I learn from my experiences in teaching with and writing for people who did not wish to spend lonely hours in a dusty archive or engaged in long conversations about the origins of the first party system? A lot. I have rethought why I teach and how; I have reevaluated my relationship with nonacademics; and I have redefined what being a member of my profession means to me.

From my many years directing or participating in teacher institutes and seminars, I learned to reassess both why I taught and how I taught. For although I came into these institutes as an expert on the role of women in the American Revolution or on Hamilton’s economic programs, I quickly found myself a novice when it came to teaching. The elementary- and secondary-school

teachers who participated in these institutes had a far clearer understanding of the goals of teaching and far greater knowledge of how to do it well.

Now, I want to establish right off the bat that I was, by the standards of our semiannual student evaluations and by that most celebrated Website ratemyprofessor.com, a pretty good teacher. I was friendly; I was accessible; I was funny; and I was well prepared for each class. Students thought I knew my stuff—as one of our business students put it in a very backhanded compliment, “You seem pretty smart—how come you do this for a living?” But, I was never really certain what my goal or purpose was in the classroom. The administration, like administrations everywhere, wanted me to evaluate students’ ability, to judge their intelligence and their competence to do the work assigned, to rank them with grades, to grant them a pass or fail them. My department, like departments everywhere, wanted me to get high marks as a “good teacher” and to attract as many students as possible into other history courses. I operated for many years with a nearly schizophrenic set of goals: one, the “rescue fantasy,” which involved the vague notion of joining the ranks of Miss Jane Pittman and other inspirational teachers who were responsible for helping promising youths find themselves; the other, the Robin Williams, *Dead Poets Society* fantasy, in which my own personal love for history was enough to capture the hearts and minds of students forever.

After working with teachers in a dozen summer institutes, I realized how little I understood about what ought to go on in a classroom. I am talking about more than pedagogy; I am talking about *how* I teach as well as *why*. Perhaps I would have come to understand this, in time, on my own. But I believe it was my conversations with teachers that finally led me to define my goals. Over and over again, the best of these teachers conveyed to me the simple fact that their goal was to assist their students—to find effective ways to open up the storehouse of historical knowledge rather than set a series of challenges before them that tested their worthiness. And these teachers retained this philosophy in the face of constraints far more daunting than any we in the academy face: state and national standards, endless testing, overcrowded classrooms, and a perennial shortage of chalk and paper.

Because of these teachers, I have realized how important it is to articulate my goals to myself before I walk into the classroom. What do I want students to get out of this particular hour and fifteen minutes we will spend together—and, more importantly, what do I want them to get out of the study of history? It has become essential to me that I keep these objectives in mind, for they determine the techniques I will use to convey my ideas and information, and they will set the terms by which I judge my success and the students’. My goals are to provide students with the analytic tools to understand their world better, the expressive skills to articulate that understanding well, a greater and more sustained curiosity about how that world came to be as it is, and an empathy for how it was for generations past.

To achieve these goals, I have become a “new light” rather than an “old light”

teacher. That is, I do not assume that my job is to speak the truth and theirs is to receive it—or not. Instead, like the evangelical preachers of the Great Awakening, my job is to start from where the students are in their knowledge and help them work their way to a more complex and richer understanding. I first realized this when I heard some elementary school teachers describe their “word trees”—a list on the blackboard made up of words students said they didn’t understand, followed by definitions arrived at by class participation. I thought back on experiences I had in which, for the want of a definition, an interpretation was lost. One freshman survey came to mind. I had given what I was convinced was a brilliant, insightful, even witty lecture on Jackson’s veto of the second Bank of the United States. When I was done, I asked for questions and discussion. The first question was, “Professor Berkin, was Jackson for or against the bank?” The student did not know what the word *veto* meant. And why should she? She had arrived in this country six months earlier, and *veto* was not on the list of one thousand common words you should know.

The account of the word tree started me thinking. And since then, when I walk into the classroom, I remember to ask myself: who are your students? Not who do I wish they were? But, who are they? And how can I best reach them? In my classroom, the students are from over one hundred and fifty countries; most are first generation college students; many received their pre-college education abroad; and for many, English is a second or third language. And, while I don’t create a word tree, I have learned to speak with parentheses: if I use a word that may be unfamiliar—in fact, even a word that has the slightest chance of being unfamiliar—I follow it with a comma, then a definition or a synonym, and then I move on. It is now second nature to me, and it does not distract from the point I am making or “dumb down” the argument; all it does is make the information genuinely accessible to more students.

Secondly, my work on television documentaries has proved to be beneficial. Among other things, it has helped me master, or at least begin to master, the art of succinct explanation. I have discussed my experiences as a talking head at great length in a piece I wrote for the *OAHS Newsletter* (February 2005), but here I only want to repeat one thing I learned about myself as a historian. As I answered questions about my field before the cameras I found great pleasure in being asked to share what I knew with a wide audience. It did not matter if everything I knew about revolutionary camp followers or the constitutional convention couldn’t be recounted; what did matter was the discovery that there was a genuine interest “out there” in the subjects I had devoted so much time and effort to. This discovery has changed my understanding of my profession and the scholarly work I do: they are no longer fit only for an ivory tower; they are now intimately connected to that world outside. Corny as it may sound, this adds to my sense of responsibility as I do historical research: I want to tell the story properly, accurately, and with whatever insight I can, because there are many more people for whom that story matters than I ever imagined.

Finally, this recognition that there is a wide and eager audience for history outside the academy has prompted me to begin writing books aimed at that

general audience. In writing these narratives, I have had the satisfying experience of revisiting interpretations and arguments I made in earlier scholarly work. In the past, I often joked with my graduate students that all history monographs should be put out in loose-leaf binders so that, as we mature as scholars, we can go back and revise or expand upon what we said in earlier work. Yet, too often, in my career at least, I have moved on to new topics—too busy to reflect upon older ones. Sometimes, in passing, I have thought back on what I have written and said, “Oh, wait, now I *really* understand.” Writing popular history, much like writing a textbook, has given me an opportunity to—no, it has demanded that I—review, rethink, confirm or alter my earlier interpretations and analyses. I have been surprised to see how much my interpretations have changed—and how satisfying it is to muse about old topics and correct old mistakes.

These projects have profoundly changed my view of my profession. I once thought of writing history as a highly individualistic enterprise. On several occasions, I have referred to historians as the last remaining independent artisans. This may still be so in the sense that we pick our own topics, we do our own research, we organize our writing as we choose. But writing popular history has led me to recognize that our scholarship is also a collective effort. I could not have written a popular history of the constitutional convention without drawing upon the work of the many scholars in the field; I could not have narrated the role of women in the American Revolution without a reliance on the research and interpretations of others. This has proved to be more than a change in outlook. It has led to an increased willingness on my part to collaborate with other scholars. And it has allowed me to see my own work as one piece of a mosaic that will ultimately produce a coherent picture.

When I first began to venture into the world of teacher development, documentaries, and popular history, I thought that this world and the world of my scholarship would be, and would remain, separate. But the relationship between them has grown more intimate; the linkages have become clearer. For me, the two are part of the same enterprise: doing history.

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