# Priming the Historian in All Planners

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This article advocates bringing historical analysis methods—thinking like a historian—and primary sources into the planning classroom. It reviews recent literature on teaching history and on how the general public uses the past. It offers an introduction and guide to historical methods and provides specific teaching examples that I have tested in my planning history course. Introducing students to historical analysis methods and primary sources, in addition to livening up the delivery of historical content, can assist students to understand the importance of context for planning solutions, the complexity of planning issues, and the possibility for change that contingency brings.

Keywords: historical skills; primary sources; pedagogy

In the early 1990s, I was a planning student feeling my way through a summer internship. My task: research and prepare briefing papers for a task force charged by the state Department of Transportation to survey how land use affected the transportation system and to make policy recommendations. In researching access management, I came across an old study, from the 1950s, that the department had conducted on this very topic. Excited, I wrote a memo summarizing the study and quoting its recommendations. The task force, pleased with my memo, took the expedient step: the members adopted the 1950s recommendations, word for word, as their own. And a young planner-in-the-making walked away mortified, yet still unsure what she should have done differently.

More than a decade, a Ph.D. in history, and five years of teaching history to other planners-in-the-making at the University of Oklahoma later, I now more fully understand my reaction—that sense of wrongness—to the episode. I've rejected the simplest solution to the above experience: the mistake was *not* looking for previous studies and writing the memo, that is, thinking that the past was relevant. I remain convinced that the methodological and analytical skills developed by historians will serve

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planners well for all the reasons presented by Carl Abbott, Sy Adler, Howell Baum, June Manning Thomas, Marsha Ritzdorf, Raphaël Fischler, Leonie Sandercock, and other planning scholars, in addition to in the contributions contained in this issue of the Journal of Planning History. 1 But, as Abbott and Adler remind us,

[T]he effective use of history has to be taught just as much as the effective use of statistics or cartography. History becomes a valuable analytical approach for urban planners only to the extent that it is applied consciously and consistently.<sup>2</sup>

The research of Sam Wineburg and others on historical cognition, and their conclusion that historical skills are "unnatural acts," reveals the fallacy that these skills will develop in planners without assistance.<sup>3</sup> This article serves this educational goal through advocating bringing primary sources—the bread and butter of historical analysis—into the planning classroom.

I've written this article with three audiences in mind. First and foremost, it is an introduction and guide for those many planning educators who, without formal training in the discipline of history, are responsible for the history portions of professional planning curriculums or desire to use "the past" to improve students' understanding of specific knowledge areas, be they transportation policies or the studio project's small-town comprehensive plan update. It may be useful to the reverse group—those with formal history training who are adapting its instruction to a professional setting, where the profession is not historian but planner, landscape architect, or the like. Finally, for those with a foot firmly planted in both history and planning, I raise several issues that need further thought. I draw on the recent literature emanating out of mainstream history circles, covering what it offers and where it falls short when applied to professional planning education. I conclude with examples from my teaching.

During the past fifteen years, due in part to the sometimes painful "history wars," historians, teachers, and education theorists have worked to invigorate history teaching and learning at all levels, making this an opportune time to consider the role of history in the professional education setting. Throughout the same time, the Internet has allowed the instant, global distribution of newly digitized archival material, opening up teaching possibilities unthinkable when these materials were locked up in dusty boxes. The role of primary sources in instruction, whether to strengthen understanding of content or develop historical skills, is an old pedagogical debate, because all realized that somewhere between schoolchild and professional historian, these skills needed to be learned.<sup>5</sup> Current thought favors starting early, and, indeed, most U.S. states require the use of primary sources at some level of elementary and/or secondary history education. If these efforts succeed, will students start to expect that primary source analysis be a part of what quality history instruction does?

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Before continuing, I want to pause to acknowledge that this entire effort is based on a premise that may be up for debate: that "thinking like a historian" is a distinct way of knowing that comprises a unique set of analytical methods and processes. The discipline of history, therefore, is itself worthy of study, as are methods of teaching/learning it. I also want to recognize that the planning curriculum is already crammed full of knowledge, skills, and values components, and although there has been recent discussion about expanding the historical content, the skills components still overwhelmingly represent the social science perspective. So in a busy curriculum, when most historical methods, or even history itself, were not a significant part of the instructor's formal training, it will be up to the individual to decide that teaching historical analysis is worth his or her effort.

The methods of social scientists, however, have been used to shed light on the relationship between history and daily life. In the mid-1990s, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, in a survey of more than 1,400 adult Americans, probed how they engage and make use of "the past." (Tellingly, they discovered in pretests of the survey that asking about "the past" elicited richer answers than asking about "history.") The survey uncovered that not only do adult Americans engage "the past" remarkably often, but also they found most trustworthy those sources that they could engage with firsthand and—just as importantly—interrogate themselves.9 This reinforces the pedagogical theories that students find history courses more meaningful and learn content better when instruction includes primary source analysis. Not to be overlooked is the emotional impact of coming into contact with the real thing. Using myself as an example, although I had read extensively on the use of racially restrictive covenants, all the academic writing did not compare to the effect of seeing those words of prejudice and exclusion typed neatly in the assigned place on the deed to a single-family house.

More directly related to planning, the Rosenzweig and Thelen survey found that adult Americans use the past, and see themselves as using the past, to "shape the future." They create narratives to monitor change and continuity, which in turn help them to understand differing and changing perspectives. The process, in some, leads to taking responsibility for the past and accepting responsibility for the future. Granted, the survey focused on personal uses of the past, but drawing too abrupt a distinction between personal and professional lives risks being arbitrary. Now imagine the same set of sentences written with the term *statistics* instead of *the past*. Imagine a survey that found that most Americans use statistics to shape the future, creating pie charts and line graphs to monitor change and continuity as part of taking responsibility for the future. We planning educators would all be jumping up and down in excitement. Historical methods and analysis clearly offer the possibility of a shared language among planners and between planners and the public.

This raises the question of how well we use the past, a question not directly addressed in the Rosenzweig and Thelen survey. I think it unnecessary to start from the premise that those without historical training use the past wrongly or badly; instead, the question should be, Would appropriate training empower them to do it better? Does something other than time or effort distinguish the thinking of academically trained historians? Sam Wineburg's studies answer this question in the affirmative. For example, in a study of academic historians confronted with texts outside their area of expertise and high school students in advanced placement history courses, Wineburg notes significant differences in each group's approach to analysis. Briefly, whereas the students viewed texts as sources of information, the professional historians approached texts as human creations designed to do work and thus asked questions about who, why, and when before presuming that they could understand what information the documents contained. Wineburg uses the metaphor of the courtroom, in which the historians acted as prosecuting attorneys, whereas the students sat passively on the jury. He concludes that "for students, the locus of authority was in the text; for historians, it was in the questions they formulated about the text." Because authority resides in the questions asked, not the sources themselves, historians are able to analyze problems through what Wineburg calls "cultivating puzzlement." <sup>10</sup>

## Historical Thinking in the Planning Classroom

The challenges of an interdisciplinary field such as planning extend to history instruction. Although the courses are provided at the graduate or upper-division undergraduate level, they are filled with students from an assortment of disciplinary backgrounds, from history majors to those who haven't had a history course since high school, which might have been twenty years ago. I find the diversity of students' disciplines more of a challenge for teaching historical content; the historical skills components tend to even the playing field. Moreover, these skills do not happen in a vacuum but by their very nature are anchored in content. Students already skilled at historical analysis will quickly see exercises using these skills as a way to learn new content. I expect, although this may be my own perspective, that students will find the analysis even more enjoyable as they master the techniques.

When it comes to methods for teaching historical skills, however, a ready cookbook of tried and true recipes does not exist. David Pace has recently lamented the lack of knowledge about effective teaching strategies, observing that even academic historians are often "amateurs in the operating room," conceptualizing teaching through "haphazardly shared folk wisdom." Historians themselves make understanding what they do, let

alone teaching it, difficult. John Lewis Gaddis encourages his colleagues "to make their methods more explicit," because historians' inclination to have "form conceal function . . . too often confuses our students—even at times, ourselves—as to just what it is we do."12 In other words, historians do not usually think in terms of standard operating procedures, let alone having tested these procedures in the typical classroom environment. Here, then, is something that we who endeavor to adapt historical teaching to the professional education setting might offer to mainstream history instruction, for, after all, even most history majors do not go on to become academic or public historians.

Fortunately, there is a growing literature on history pedagogy in general and on integrating primary sources into history instruction in particular. The largest group focuses on precollegiate educational settings, aiming to bring teachers, whose training in "social studies" may not have included much history, up to speed. Planning educators may find themselves in a similar position—teaching outside their area of expertise. Susan Veccia's Uncovering Our History: Teaching with Primary Sources is a good example of this genre. She focuses on using the Library of Congress's Web site in the classroom. Its collection of photographs and maps of the American landscape can be a useful source in the planning classroom, but, as with most of this literature, transforming Veccia's insights into education-level appropriate exercises will be left to the planning educator.

There is also literature on improving undergraduate history instruction, although here the model—and the assumed audience—is the academic historian. 13 Planning educators using this literature should be aware that doing so assumes that the skills and methods—either on their own or in their emphasis in the mix of activities—transfer from academic historian to another type of professional attempting to engage the past responsibly. For example, although teaching students how to engage historiographical problems and to contribute to historians' debates are appropriate aims for the academic model of undergraduate education, they probably deserve less emphasis in the professional education model. Most of this literature comprises a storehouse of ideas for how to use primary sources in the context of general education history courses. It is too much to expect, however, that it would be tuned to the planning curriculum. Although there are exceptions—Hsuing's "place paper" and Ward and McCabe's discussion of plat maps are examples of teaching ideas that might be directly applied to planning education—in most cases, the planning educator will have to transfer the concepts and methods to more appropriate primary sources.14

I begin by creating a common student understanding of what it means to "do" history. My working definition of history, which I present to students, is the study of change throughout time, with special sensitivity to the three C's: context, complexity, and contingency. <sup>15</sup> These three are Downloaded from jph.sagepub.com at UNIV OF OKLAHOMA on January 20, 2016

not necessarily the last word on the definition. Other candidate C's include continuity (or is this captured in the absence of change?), causation, and comparison. John Lewis Gaddis has recently suggested "consilience," although I confess to be still grappling with what he means by this. 16

"Doing" history is essentially a creative undertaking that requires certain actions: gathering evidence, analyzing and interpreting evidence, developing an understanding of context, and drafting narratives and arguments. These are not steps. Any attempted diagram would display arrows spinning everywhere and circles inside circles that suddenly invert themselves. Instead, these actions are done all at once and as needed. They typically require a mix of primary and secondary sources. A process that selects for significance and assesses for reliability and perspective guides the entire effort.

Interrogating the text, image, or artifact is the essence of a historical analysis of sources. Robert Bain presents a series of questions, slightly modified and expanded below, that assist students in comprehending and interpreting the "information" contained within a source:

- Who made the source?
- When?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What is the story line within the source?
- Why was it produced?
- What purpose did it serve? How?
- Does other evidence support the source? How?
- Does other evidence contest the source? How?
- Is the source believable? Why?
- What is the story line that connects all the sources? 17

Another simple way of approaching source analysis is to conceptualize all sources as doing work. What kind of work does a Census Bureau Report do? How? Is there a difference between the work the report was originally designed to do and the work the current-day reader is putting it to?

A crucial activity the planning educator will have to do, or at least guide, is selecting appropriate sources for student analysis. Should students focus on "foundational" sources, planning's equivalents to the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address, such as the "landmark publications" listed on the American Planning Association Web site?<sup>18</sup> Or would more mundane materials such as memos, meeting minutes, press releases, government reports, planning studies, property records, legal proceedings, and real estate advertisements better emulate the types of sources that planners will have an opportunity to learn from when on the job? Readers, sourcebooks, and other republished material make "foundational" sources easier to acquire, but the same importance that got these materials published may make them more difficult for students to approach. (Is it likely that a beginning planning student will

feel confident enough to interrogate Frederick Law Olmsted or Jane Jacobs?) Bridging this divide, professional periodicals from the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century, included in most research university library collections, contain many place-based articles where local professionals and activists shared their city's experiences.<sup>19</sup> Developing other primary sources may require a little archival work; a first step might be contacting your university's history librarian. Finally, don't overlook the potential goldmine hidden in your own files.

## Primary Sources in "History and Theory of Urban Planning"

Examples from my own teaching conclude this article. Because I have the privilege, and luxury, of teaching a planning graduate course with history in its title that is, moreover, part of the required core curriculum, I have been able to build the entire course around learning historical analysis skills. This may be an unrealistic expectation for planning curriculums that are configured differently. A second caveat: I acquired many of the primary sources I use during my own historical research, then later adapted them to classroom use. So, in addition to my twenty-first-century Oklahoma students getting a good dose of Michigan in the 1940s, not all of the sources are readily available.

Because my objective is skill development, the students all work on the same exercises, using or having available to them the same primary and secondary sources. Because I need to be able to assess their learning, I must be familiar with the sources. Exploring their own interests is left to elective courses. I dedicate some class time for group work, and even individually graded exercises wind up as fodder for class discussion, thus, having students work on the same exercises creates a community of learning. Finally, given the same sources, students inevitably come up with different analyses, sometimes significantly so. When shared, the exercises become built-in lessons on the creative nature of history, the process of selecting for significance, and the importance of point of view.

I begin with short, in-class exercises to prepare students for graded assignments. For example, a traditional, content-oriented teaching approach to Clarence Perry's neighborhood unit, first published in the Regional Plan of New York in 1929, would be for the teacher to project, present, and explain the diagram. Using about the same amount of class time, Perry's neighborhood unit provides a quick exercise on finding and articulating evidence from a primary source. Previous readings and lectures will have familiarized the students with the American planning profession's multiple roots in social reform movements and in business circles working with engineers to create a more efficient city. I also note for the students Clarence Perry's ties to social reformers, whereas the Regional

Plan of New York is usually considered an example of "city functional" planning. I ask the students, working in small groups, to analyze the neighborhood unit for evidence of both these planning traditions.<sup>20</sup>

Another favorite source for classroom analysis is Mrs. Samuel Ammon's "How to Secure a Playground," published in Charities and the Commons in 1907.21 I was initially attracted to this text because it gives voice to one of the many women in the trenches of the Progressive Era's urban reform movements. The students start with who she is. Other than her marital status and title—treasurer of the Pittsburg Playground Association—the text gives little direct biographical information. We don't even have her given name. By probing the text, we tease out clues. She was definitely well educated and probably middle class. Students put forth quotes that show how she approached the wealthy classes, which she viewed as a mostly frivolous lot open to manipulation, from the position of supplicant, while she presented playgrounds as something needed by other people's, poor people's, children. We then move to her audience. Her inclusive language and her instructions on how to get started by working with other women lead to the conclusion that she was speaking to women like herself.

These are just preparatory analyses, though, for the heart of the text: Ammon's advice on "securing" playgrounds. We start with what Ammon thought someone who had acquired "the playground habit" needed to know. We end up with a list that looks remarkably similar to a planning curriculum as we go through her paragraphs on the importance of enabling legislation, the structures and budget processes of local government, and land use and property surveys. We then turn to what she thought her audience should do. Here, her every sentence is infused with a political awareness that is strongly informed by her gendered experiences. Her basic strategy: start small, show results, and build momentum. Every step, she advised, should be calculated to get the biggest political gain. She saw managing communication as crucial, advising how to attract press coverage; when to use the personal touch, "describ[ing] it as you would in a letter to a friend"; and when to pull out the statistics. Moreover, she seems perfectly comfortable with gathering support by telling people what they wanted to hear, downplaying her own motives for advocating playgrounds.

We end the analysis by discussing, Is this planning? The weight of the evidence usually comes down on the side of no. The Ammon method is too far distant from the model of planning that came out of the Progressive Era. It makes no attempt to be comprehensive. It bears little resemblance to either Daniel Burnham's "make no little plans" or the political theories that led to the creation of the "apolitical" planning commission model. Finally, Ammon's advocacy zeal seems at odds with the development of the professional expert. All these issues, and Ammon, will come up again as the course visits the developing ideas of incrementalism, advocacy, implementation, and communicative action in the history of planning theory.

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The course requires four individually graded essay assignments, two of which are summarized below. The first asks students to draw from multiple sources to come up with the story of a neighborhood. The second gives students one source that they must interrogate thoroughly to understand the complex group of stakeholders interested in one small grocery store.

Pittsfield Village, built in 1944 outside of Ann Arbor, Michigan, is a comprehensively planned neighborhood that still exists today, although it has become enveloped by the city. Given newspaper clippings from the neighborhood's beginning, advertisements dated circa 1950, and information downloaded from the neighborhood's current Web site, the assignment asks the students to write an essay describing what this neighborhood is, how it fits into the history of suburbanization, and how it reinforces or challenges notions of the good suburban life. The neighborhood began as a rental community of garden apartments but today is cooperatively owned, requiring the students to write a narrative of change, although information pertaining to the decision surrounding the ownership changes and even its date are absent from the sources. The advertisements tout both the neighborhood's suburban location and its "New England Village" community culture, creating, from a twenty-first-century perspective, a contradictory picture of the goals of suburban life. Although the design has much in common with the New Deal's Greenbelt cities, the advertisements attempt to persuade potential occupants that the attached units have nearly all the advantages of single-family houses. Today, the neighborhood still prides itself on, and fosters, its community orientation.<sup>22</sup>

The assignment requires students to create a coherent narrative while juggling the multiple contexts of a housing development that began on the eve of the postwar suburban boom and is now maintaining itself as an inner-ring suburban neighborhood. Notions of good suburban life have also changed throughout time. In addition, the assignment has a built-in mystery for students to find. The secondary readings and my presentations on suburbanization emphasize the Federal Housing Administration's (FHA) overwhelming favor toward newly built, individually owned, singlefamily houses, yet part of the reason why this apartment development garnered press attention was because it was the "largest ever insured in Michigan by the FHA."23 Unless they've somehow come across the FHA's relatively short-lived Section 608 program for rental apartments, the students will be unable to resolve this apparent contradiction, but they get bonus points for raising it. In addition to prompting discussion on suburban roads not taken, this seemingly straightforward assignment is filled with puzzlement to cultivate.

The final assignment asks students to confront the complexity of even small endeavors and to struggle to understand the power relations in everyday community building. The source is a nine-page, typed, double-spaced memo describing the work of two white activists in the small city

In the memo, Hans Schmidt documented how he and his assistant, Betty Johnson, worked during the course of several months to help local residents found a cooperative grocery store. The assignment overlaps the "theory" portion of the course, so in addition to puzzling their way through the memo, the students are asked to apply a planning theory of their choice. (For example, students use Arnstein's "A Ladder of Citizen Participation" to analyze the power dynamics of interactions or Forester's "Planning in the Face of Conflict" to dissect the strategies the activists used.)<sup>25</sup> But before applying the theory, students have to work their way through the thicket of stakeholders. Schmidt and Johnson faced an African American community divided between new arrivals and longtime residents and by the experience of past efforts at biracial cooperation with the city's white-dominated power structure. This same white power structure eyed the activists suspiciously as they tiptoed so that neither side of the racial divide would accuse them of "meddling." At the same time, Schmidt and Johnson had to justify their activities to their organization's funding agencies. And just when they thought they had everything settled, a white group of cooperative enthusiasts from a neighboring city tried to join en masse, unintentionally threatening the entire project.

Students eventually get to the summary provided in the paragraph above, but they must distill this information from Schmidt's chronological account of meetings and events and the tone and language in his memo. This is difficult, especially with the theory assignment attached to it, and it usually requires two drafts of the individually graded essay, written before and after a planned intervention during class discussion. The weakness of this particular exercise, as a student always points out, is that it represents only one point of view: that of someone who is sympathetic but white. This leads to a discussion of how Schmidt's point of view and own interests influenced what he wrote. Somewhere in the middle of this all, students protest that this story is too messy. To which I reply, It is just a grocery store. I can see on their faces that this does not satisfy them. What are you going to do, I ask, when you don't have a nine-page memo nicely laying out the history of a controversial issue and the interests of its stakeholders?

In addition to providing a way to liven up the delivery of historical content, bringing historical analysis methods and primary sources into the planning classroom can assist students to understand the importance of

context for planning solutions, the complexity of planning issues, and the possibility for change that contingency brings. The examples described above aim to provide planning educators models that they can adapt to their own sources and needs. My experience shows that these methods do persuade students that context matters and that even small planning issues can be surprisingly complex. Other than exploring roads not taken, I am still looking for good ways—or sources—that communicate to students the power in the knowledge that history is contingent. "Thinking like a historian" is a way to heighten planners' awareness of the narratives they create out of the past and to train planners to interrogate the world around them with something approaching a professional historian's skill and confidence.

#### Notes

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- 15. I'm indebted to Greg Hise's presentation of the three C's as part of the Teaching History to Planners Roundtable at the Tenth National Conference on Planning History, St. Louis, Missouri, November 2003.
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