History as Method or Does Chronology Count?

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ABSTRACT
This article introduces some of the differing approaches to historical research that are utilized within adult education and lifelong learning. It discusses archives, types of sources, and approaches to interpretation. Whenever the author talks about history or historical research one of two things happen: People get excited and start telling her how fascinated they are by a particular aspect of history or their eyes glaze over. In this article, the author is hoping for a different kind of reaction.

KEYWORDS
History, Interpretation, Method

INTRODUCTION
Why History?
Simply stated, history is the story of the past. It involves the study of documents and sources generated contemporaneously with the period under study. Using disparate documents, historians piece together a coherent narrative or a period or place. Multiple strands are then pulled together to give a rich overview of a period or place in more general histories. Historical research and writing inevitably includes a point of view and some attempt at explanation. In general, historians do not think about history as a method, although they do recognize that there is an historical method. For this reason, most historical research does not include a methodology section. The only departure from this is when the research method includes statistical analyses. These types of studies will include a discussion of the method. While there is not usually a methodology section, most research works do include a section on sources. These indicate the archives and other materials consulted.

Uses of History
There is no one agreed upon use for historical research. Within the discipline itself, history is usually approached as a puzzle to be solved. Historians generally begin their work with a series of questions. While they often start by asking what happened, they usually end up tackling the question of why did this happen or what caused it to happen. This question of causation is quite complex and never fully resolved. The study of history involves some kind of commitment to the idea that the past leads to the present and the future. This means that the past affects or builds on the present and that therefore, individuals need to know about, if not understand the past in order to truly understand the present. However, the lessons are at best murky. For example, the famous Santayana dictum, (1905, p. 284) that “Those who cannot remember the past, are condemned to repeat it” is pithy, but does not fully
convey the complexity of historical understanding. Historical events build on each other. Although our sense of chronology is viewed through our own idiosyncratic cultural context, nevertheless there is a sense that what happens affects in some unknown way what will happen. This means, that history does not repeat itself although there may be patterns. It often a truism that historians look at the individual event and that political scientists and sociologists may look at the same data and seek patterns. This is less true now than it has been in the past since historians do now generally look for patterns and trends, but by and large they do not look at generalizable patterns. Since historical events are unique, they are not seen has helpful for prediction.

This truism was clearly presented in the work of Neustadt and May (1986) who wrote about the misuse of historical analogies. For example, they state that American hesitation about entrance into the second World War was based on an erroneous analogy to the situation preceding World War I. And similarly, American involvement in Vietnam was based on an erroneous understanding of World War II. In other words, attempting to use history to solve present day problems is fraught with danger and potential misunderstanding.

The relationship between history and theory is uncomfortable at best. There is no single underlying theoretical framework for historical research. Theories, as in all of the social sciences, are easily utilized and discarded. Most historians utilize a method that focuses on the narrative or telling a story. At times, they borrow theoretical frameworks from the social sciences. Beginning with the historian Richard Hofstadter’s thesis (1955) that anxiety about social status was the basis for progressive reform in the early twentieth century, different social science theories has had major, albeit brief impact on various aspects of the study of history. Historians of adult education have not generally borrowed or added to theory, although this may be changing. Platt and Hill (2014) make interesting use of geographic spacing in their study of prostitution in New Orleans. In general, however, most historians have focused on telling some aspect of the story of adult education, focusing on who is left out and who is included. This in turn relates to the all-important issue of what kinds of questions are asked.

**Historical Questions**

The historians’ task is to understand the past as a series of unique events. They do this by analyzing sources in order to answer questions about either the past or the present. The questions can come from anywhere, but they are usually framed by both extensive reading and individual personal experience. They may come from the historian’s own personal experience. Historical research is also embedded in the research of others. Historians, like other researchers formulate what they want to know based on what others have already found. While we start with initial questions, these will necessarily change as information is unearthed (or found to be non-existent). In general, historical inquiry cannot answer causational questions. We can never entirely know whether A’s actions caused B’s responses. However, we infer causation or at least connection by looking at a multitude of sources both public and private.

Historical research involves looking at unique events. This means looking at particular questions, individuals or phenomena. But historical research involves the particular. Unlike social scientists who are testing theories, historians are looking to explain and sometimes describe. There is a conundrum here. Historians are seeking to explain and often to discuss causation, while simultaneously recognizing the utter impossibility of finding the exact cause of an event.

The questions posed can come from anywhere, but generally, they are derived from previous historical work. With the area of adult education or lifelong learning, the chief questions at the moment revolve around the development and growth of the field. The first question of course, is what is the field? Then how this develop and why? Differing historians at different times have answered this in myriad ways. Depending on how the field is defined, its sources can lie in the professional literature or somewhere else. Differing views for example have emerged about the movement of the study of adult education into the university. While Grace (2000) sees the growth of the professoriate as the triumph of the hegemonic influence of the scientific method. Asking slightly different uses and asking
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