

In Search of the Right Words: A History Teacher's Exploration of College Students' Epistemic Beliefs about History

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IT'S EARLY MAY on a beautiful spring afternoon. I am sitting outside on the quads with three other professors from the history department. While we soak up the warmth of the balmy sun, we start to talk about our students. I love these moments. One of the advantages of working at a small liberal arts college is the chance to share with my colleagues how students are improving, growing, transforming. "Yasmine has grown a lot this semester." "Rudy, instead, does not seem to get it." "Lauren is doing great." These conversations promote camaraderie and make us feel we are all contributing to something meaningful. We all seem to understand each other, and yet our language is so vague. What do we actually mean when we use these expressions? We are not talking about a basic skill that we need to assess. We are talking about something more complex and holistic. On second thought, despite our inability to find the right words, these comments are attempts to address a type of epistemic switching that we experienced in our youth. This change occurred when we finally abandoned the belief that the past and history coincide, we recognized that historical knowledge is not just

the product of a person's opinion, and then we came to the realization that history comes from the rigorous application of a criterion rooted in a meticulous process of interpretation of the evidence available from the past. If we want for our students to reach this level of understanding of the nature of historical knowledge, our teaching needs to be more intentionally centered on how that knowledge is created. In other words, our instruction needs to explicitly address the epistemology of history. In this article, I start with discussing what the scholarship of teaching and learning in history has to say about the role that epistemological inquiry should play in the history classroom. I will then describe the history classroom through the lens of students' beliefs about the nature and source of historical knowledge (that is, their epistemic beliefs about history). In this section, I will also share the work of educational researchers who have developed a questionnaire (the "Beliefs about History Questionnaire," or BHQ) to measure students' epistemic beliefs about history. I will then share how my experience with the investigation of twenty-three students' epistemic views about history in two of my upper-level courses (using the BHQ instrument and another free-response survey I created) revealed that students who were willing to engage with historical knowledge through the filter of their personal beliefs (independent of what these beliefs are) were also the ones who displayed a higher level of understanding of the interpretational nature of history. I will then provide suggestions for practical applications of these findings, including an exercise that brings current affairs to the history classroom that may help students achieve a deeper understanding of the epistemology of the historical discipline.

What Do We Mean When We Say That We Teach History?

Before starting my investigation, I had first to make clear to myself what I meant when I say that I teach history. The "History Discipline Core" document created by the American Historical Association served as a good reminder.¹ According to these guidelines, students of history should acquire the ability to build historical knowledge; understand the essence of the historical method and be able to use it to create new knowledge; grapple with the complexity, provisionality, and open-ended nature of the historical knowledge; and use the historical method and historical content to make sense of the present.²

The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) in history has been a strong advocate for this kind of pedagogy for over two decades, and has a rich literature that stresses the importance to address both content and the epistemology that produced that knowledge in the history classroom.³ Stéphane Lévesque (building on the path-breaking scholarship of researchers Peter Lee and Rosalyn Ashby) has eloquently argued that students' ability to think historically occurs when both content and method are nurtured in the classroom. In his work, he demystifies the binary view of history teaching that maintains that content knowledge has to be prioritized over exposing students to the complexity of the process that created that knowledge. He asserts that, while content acquisition might be easier to master for students than the historical method, the former should not be conceived as propaedeutic to more sophisticated ways of teaching history. He adds that an approach to history teaching that synergistically cultivates both content and the procedures that produced that knowledge may actually help students develop a historical perspective they could use to make sense of the present.

Similarly, Lendol Calder has argued against the belief that the epistemology of history is a subject that should be kept hidden from students until they take an upper-level course or go to graduate school. Using evidence from cognitive science to counter the common misconception that (at the survey level) content coverage should have priority over "doing history," he states that students do not retain content knowledge administered to them unless they have the chance to apply it. He further comments, "The problem with defenders of traditional surveys, then, is not that they care about facts too much but that they do not care about facts enough to inquire about the nature of how people learn them."⁴ Instead of worrying about covering as much content as possible, he recommends teachers use their surveys to "uncover" historical knowledge, discuss with students how that knowledge was developed, and present the historical discipline for what it actually is: an "epistemological domain."⁵

Building on the assumption that every discipline is a specific way of knowing, David Pace and his colleagues have developed a model (known as the "Decoding the Discipline Model") to help students master the mental operations specific to each disciplinary domain. The first step of the process requires teachers to recognize a "bottleneck"—that is, a specific task that students have difficulty grasping. In the

second step, teachers are asked to become aware of the ways in which they were able to resolve similar issues. Now that the domain-specific mode of thinking has become apparent, it is time to develop a way to model such processes to students. Next, students need opportunities to practice these mental operations and get feedback on their attempts. Students will start to perceive the instructor as an “ally,” and that sense of trust will (hopefully) keep them motivated. Last, Pace argues that the assessment of student learning will be performed with ease because what needs to be assessed had been determined and analyzed at the beginning of the process.⁶

From a broader perspective, Joel M. Sipress and David J. Volker (using a curriculum development model they borrow from Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe) propose to redesign the survey history course based on how we answer this fundamental question: Why is it important to teach historical thinking in the first place? We will then develop a course that cultivates the values that inspire our response. For instance, they believe that, within the general education curriculum, survey history courses should serve the purpose of promoting those skills associated with “active and engaged citizenship,” and argue that an argument-based American history survey could achieve that goal best.⁷

This review of SoTL literature for history would be incomplete without mentioning Sam Wineburg’s research. Indeed, the very core assumption of his work is that historical thinking is a unique way of thinking that needs to be taught intentionally to students. In recent years, his Stanford History Education Group has expanded its commitment to helping students learn to “read like a historian” to giving students the tools to properly evaluate all information (not just historical sources) they find on the Internet.⁸

Seeing the History Classroom through the Prism of Students’ Epistemic Beliefs

The review of the literature of teaching and learning in history makes it clear that good history teaching should address both historical content and the epistemology that produced that knowledge. A look into the epistemic environment students encounter when they enter a college history classroom may help us shed more light on their learning. Developed first in the field of

psychoanalysis and anthropology and subsequently applied to the field of science education, epistemological frames (or e-frames) study students “epistemological expectations about a pedagogical situation”⁹—namely, what they expect to learn in that environment, what they think is considered knowledge in that environment, how they can contribute to that knowledge, and how that contribution will be judged. Empirical evidence (from math and physics education) indicates that if the instructor has different e-frames from those used by the students, learning does not occur.¹⁰

Arguably, the history classroom may be a breeding ground for miscommunications about the nature of historical knowledge. The literature of teaching and learning in history provides plenty of evidence to support such a statement. For instance, David Pace (using the Decoding the Discipline Model) has noticed that when we ask our students “to read,” they really do not know what we mean, partially because “reading” means different things in different disciplines.¹¹ Along the same lines, Sam Wineburg has eloquently demonstrated the difference between the ways students read a document and how professional historians approach it. His main observation is that most students read a text to collect information, whereas scholars have a much more skeptical approach to a source. Indeed, when historians read a document and start to “make sense of it,” they pay more attention to what a source does *not* say rather than what is stated.¹² Other misconceptions may arise from what counts for student participation in a history classroom. For instance, the traditional coverage model of the history survey perceives students as “learners who will absorb a body of knowledge presented to them through lectures and readings, and who will demonstrate learning by repeating it back to their instructors on exams.”¹³ This type of instruction sends students a confusing message about the source and nature of historical knowledge (mostly that facts speak for themselves) and encourages students’ passivity.¹⁴

These types of miscommunications demand a good look into the epistemic climate of the history classroom. Educational psychologists have defined the epistemic climate within a classroom in terms of “structures and resources that convey messages about knowledge and knowing.”¹⁵ These structures and resources include the type of instruction we opt for, as well as the activities and materials we choose to introduce in the classroom. Every choice that we make

in our teaching sends a specific message on the nature and source of historical knowledge, and every assumption we make is open to students' (mis)interpretation of what the study of history at the academic level entails. For instance, Sipress and Voelker explain that the traditional coverage model "casts the professor in the role of producer of scholarly knowledge, with the students relegated to the status of consumers whose tasks are to absorb and reproduce expert knowledge."¹⁶

While the scholarship of teaching and learning in history provides valuable solutions to correct these miscommunications, the field of epistemic cognition may further help us understand how students' beliefs about history interact with our instruction. Epistemic cognition studies what people "count as a valid source of knowledge, the perceived certainty and simplicity of knowledge, and the processes by which individuals weigh in competing truth claims, justify what they know and validate their own knowing."¹⁷ Even the mere definition of epistemic cognition suggests the many possibilities that such a complex field holds for history teaching because of its emphasis on how individuals evaluate sources.

Education scholars, especially Bruce VanSledright, Liliana Maggioni, and Kimberly Reddy, have investigated epistemic cognition in domain-specific areas, including math, physics, and, of most relevance to us, history. Using empirical evidence (mostly the data collected and analyzed by Peter Lee) through the lens of cognitive psychology (especially William Perry's theory of epistemic development and other researchers influenced by his work), they have created a framework built upon the assumption that historical knowledge develops with the "interaction" between an investigator (the knower) and the object the knower is trying to know (what is left from the past).¹⁸ They have then identified three fundamental epistemic views about history based on the relationship between knower and object.¹⁹

At the least sophisticated level, history learners think that history is "a direct mirror of the past."²⁰ They see evidence as a source that provides "direct access to the past," and the knowledge it provides is absolute. At this level, students (not always the students in the lower grades) do not make a distinction between past and present and do not perceive themselves as "investigators"—that is, active knowers who need to critically approach the information presented

in the document. They believe that a source has the authority to tell the absolute truth of what happened. When these students get exposed to contradictory evidence, their certainty starts to crumble.

This experience often leads students to transition to a different epistemic stance. At this state, students start to perceive themselves as active knowers and see sources as testimonies that demand some discernment in order to be “accepted.” In the presence of multiple accounts, they try to determine which source is “telling the truth” and which one is “lying,” without regard for the reasons why some sources might have overemphasized certain details. However, their discernment is not based on the systematic application of a method.

At the most sophisticated level, students realize that historical knowledge is neither completely absolute nor completely relative, but the product of a knower who has actively engaged with what is “attempted to be known.”²¹ The knower has also determined that sources need to be analyzed in their historical context (that varies in time and space), and need to be questioned (students want to find out who the author of the document is, its addressee, and why it was written).

VanSledright and Maggioni concluded that students do history at a sophisticated level when there is:

some coordination between knower (subject) and what can be known (object) that anticipate[s] or implicate[s] the operation of regulatory criteria, such as realizing that drawing evidence from accounts to make claims depends on the historical context, and therefore that many accounts and much critical analysis of them is required with a degree of intervening suspended judgment.²²

To further validate this model, they developed the “Beliefs about History Questionnaire” (BHQ) to measure a person’s preponderant epistemic beliefs about history (see **Appendix A**).²³ The questionnaire includes twenty-two statements about the nature and source of historical knowledge that respondents have to rate by means of a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The “objectivist beliefs” statements revolve around the tenet that history may be known objectively (“facts speaks for themselves”), whereas the “subjectivist beliefs” statements detect the tendency to see knowledge of the past as basically the subject’s opinion (“history is basically a matter of opinion”). Last, the “criterialist beliefs” statements reflect an epistemic stance in which

the subject and object (the evidence from the past) interact with each other to develop and validate historical knowledge (“history is a critical enquiry into the past”).²⁴

When they used this instrument to measure epistemic beliefs about history among college students (most of whom were history majors), the results were unforeseen. The expectation was that all of the participants (after completing a course designed to help students become aware of their epistemic beliefs about history) would transition from mostly objectivist and subjectivist beliefs to a more criterialist stance (professional historians who had taken the questionnaire had consistently chosen mostly criterialist statements).²⁵ Pre-and post-test results indicated that additional instruction, instead of provoking a substantial epistemological shift towards more criterialist beliefs, created uncertainty in the participants’ epistemic beliefs, a phenomenon the researchers named “epistemic wobbling.”²⁶ Epistemic wobbling is the clear manifestation of students’ struggle to conceive themselves as active creators of historical knowledge using what survived from the past. In another study by VanSledright and Reddy, when participants were asked to explain their answers, their justifications vacillated between subjectivist and objectivist statements, indicating that they were not able to fully articulate the criterialist stance. Their comments indicated a frustration towards history’s inability to fully unveil what “happened in the past.” The authors portrayed some students as “jaded objectivists, disheartened by the fact that, in history anyway, things were such that too much error and bias crept in to make definitive, objective knowledge possible.”²⁷ Even the students who did seem to have understood the criterialist stance (at least in theory) were still disoriented as far as what the “proper role, tools, and criteria” of such an approach were.²⁸

Clearly, students may encounter epistemic challenges when they take a history class. The next session of the article discusses what I have learned when I applied the epistemic lens to my teaching.

Epistemic Cognition and the History Teacher

Before discussing my experience with the Beliefs about History Questionnaire (BHQ), I feel I owe my colleagues an explanation. Some teachers may question the very act of creating an instrument

that measures aspects of students' learning that they think are more complex and nuanced than any quantifiable data will ever prove.²⁹ As for me, I find the above educational research intellectually stimulating because it gives "humanists" scientific data and frameworks through which teachers can better "read" the history classroom and possibly discover aspects of student learning that a more general approach might not be able to detect.

I administered the BHQ to twenty-three students enrolled in two of my upper-level history courses (see **Appendix A** for the BHQ). The data analysis confirmed the "epistemic wobbling" detected in the previous study. I related the indecisiveness apparent in the students' answers regarding their difficulty to "fully translate the practice into theory" and thus be able to conceptualize and verbalize all the tensions involved in the epistemology of history. The results also made me wonder if I had given students enough opportunities to reflect on all the intricacies involved in the epistemology of history. Additionally, I was intrigued to discover possible correlations between specific political and religious beliefs and upbringings and the answers students provided in the BHQ (see **Appendix B** for students' responses).

As a result, a few days after taking the first questionnaire, I asked the students to answer a series of open-ended questions to learn more about their upbringing and political views and give them the chance to explain their epistemic beliefs about history using full sentences (see **Appendix C** for the free-response questionnaire). The results were surprising (see **Appendix D** for a summary of students' answers and additional sample answers). Conservative or progressive views, religious or non-religious upbringing, first generation or not, junior or senior status, history majors or otherwise—all of these variables were not the determining factors in high criterialist scores and low subjectivist and objectivist scores. Reviewing some of the most emblematic answers, I will first consider the answers from students with a high criterialist scores, then those of students who scored low in that category.

Student Responses with High Criterialist Scores

Amariah,³⁰ a first-generation, junior history major from the South, who grew up in a religious and conservative home, agreed or strongly

agreed with most criterialist statements (but also agreed with several of the objectivist statements as her answer below suggests). When asked what it means to think historically, Amariah stated:

To think historically you really have to remove yourself from the topic. You have to look at the facts and the events, understand that there is more to it and take away your own biases and emotions (something I struggle w/constantly).

Thomas, a senior history major from the West Coast, who grew up in a progressive, non-religious home, agreed or strongly agreed with most criterialist statements. When asked how his religious views had shaped his willingness to learn the material in the course, Thomas stated:

I use my atheism to filter most if not all the material through.

Matt, a junior history major, who grew up in a conservative and religious home, strongly agreed or agreed with criterialist statements. When asked if his upbringing had shaped his willingness to learn something covered in class, Matt responded:

I was raised to be very patriotic, so it was hard to learn some of the horrible acts the United States committed. At the same time, I chose to embrace this information.

Nate, a senior history major, who grew up in a conservative home where religion did not play an important role, strongly agreed with most criterialist statements (and somewhat agreed or disagreed with several subjectivist and objectivist statements). When asked if his political views had shaped his willingness to learn something covered in class, Nate responded:

Previous to entering college, I was raised in a conservative/Republican household but a liberal arts education expanded my thoughts on education and helped me look at history not as facts but as interpretation of evidence.

Mike, a junior double major in history and political science, who grew up in a conservative home where religion played an important role, strongly agreed with most criterialist statements (and somewhat agreed or disagreed with several subjectivist and objectivist statements). When asked if his views on religion had shaped his willingness to learn something covered in class, Mike stated:

It does bother me when there are inconsistencies in the Bible and in history because it makes me feel that some religious texts and teachings are false, and it is hard to deal with sometimes.

When asked if his upbringing had shaped his willingness to learn the material in the history courses he took in college, Mike stated:

I live in a conservative and religious household, when I came to college and I heard words like white privilege, patriarchy and other words like them it really affected me. At first, I was kind of offended, but I began to realize that most of the sources and evidence professors brought out were fairly accurate. I see white privilege being relevant in society and there is no secret of it. However, I felt like I never felt it. I had to work extremely hard to get to where I am now and I never asked for any handouts.

Student Responses with Low Criterialist Scores

Jacob, a junior history major, who grew up in a conservative, religious home, disagreed with several criterialist statements (and agreed with several subjectivist statements). When asked if his political or religious views had shaped his willingness to learn something covered in class, Jacob responded:

Never really happened to me. I always enjoy learning and do not really care what it is about as long as I learn.

Victoria, a junior history major, who grew up in a home where religious and political views were “never made known,” as she put it, somewhat agreed or somewhat disagreed with several criterialist statements (and agreed with several objectivist statements). When asked if her political or religious views had shaped her willingness to learn something covered in class, Victoria responded:

No. There was never a time where I did not want to learn something because of my political or religious views.

Max, a senior history major, who grew up in a conservative and religious home, agreed and also disagreed with several criterialist statements (but strongly agreed with the statement that “facts speak for themselves”). When asked if his upbringing had shaped his willingness to learn something covered in class, Max responded:

My upbringing has allowed me to be neutral when it comes to school.

Ashleigh, a senior history major, who grew up in the South in a progressive and religious home, agreed but also somewhat agreed with several criterialist statements (but also somewhat agreed with several subjectivist and objectivist statements). When asked if her political views had shaped her willingness to learn something covered in class, Ashleigh responded:

That was never the case. My mind is open enough to not be distracted from my learning because of political views.

Analysis and Interpretation of Student Responses

Upon closer investigation of the data, I realized that students who had not indicated or articulated any type of intrapersonal dialogue between their personal views and history learning in any of the free-response questions were also the ones who had the lowest criterialist scores. On the other hand, students who seemed to have a clear understanding of their political and religious views and had engaged in a critical, internal dialogue with the material covered in class were able to score higher in the criterialist beliefs statements, and possibly had reached a deeper, more complex understanding of the nature of historical knowledge. The answers they provided in the second questionnaire support this position.

In substance, the answers suggest that a more sophisticated understanding of the epistemology of history seems to be related to a student's self-knowledge of their beliefs and experience with how those ideas have interacted with their history learning. In other words, a deeper grasp of the interpretational nature of historical knowledge seems to occur when students actually question what is presented to them and do not just sit back and "enjoy" what they are learning. Simply put, when they do not accept the role of empty vessels that need to be filled up to the brim with the professor's knowledge, but are actually engaged in understanding the material using their own perspective, they reach a higher level of epistemological sophistication. Their wrestling with the material does not result in any definitive, clear conclusion or rejection (nobody stated that they refused to read or study a specific topic), but seems to help them to feel more at ease with the complexity of historical knowledge.

While the source of the discovery might have been unexpected, its substance confirms findings both from the field of cognitive psychology

and from the scholarship of teaching and learning in history. Indeed, one of the main messages of British scholar Alan Booth's work is that "Reflection is required to turn experience into understanding."³¹ Booth states that when the goal of students is to achieve understanding, they will "subject their personal values and beliefs (and those of their teachers, discipline and society) to close scrutiny."³² He argues that students achieve deep and true understanding of a historical problem when they integrate personal ideas and experiences with the disciplinary modes of investigation. When students manage to find such levels of meaning and engagement in what they are learning, they are often transformed.³³ In light of what I learned about my students, in the next section, I will provide practical applications of my findings and give specific guidelines on how to bring current affairs to the history classroom to stimulate epistemic growth.

Application of My Findings to the History Classroom

After discovering the connection between epistemic sophistication and personal involvement, I started to reflect on my students' epistemic frames and the epistemic climate I had created in the classroom to see if my instruction was partially responsible for their epistemic growth. When I asked the students what their e-frames for the courses were, they mostly stated that they were expecting to learn about a specific historical period, that knowledge would be delivered by the professor, and that their contribution to that knowledge would come from asking questions in class. None of them mentioned anything about learning or applying a specific method of inquiry. In sum, they expected to be passive recipients of content (although most of them were not, as we have seen). However, the epistemic climate I applied in those classes (namely, methods and activities used that imply specific epistemic views) turned out to be completely different from any previous semester. Truthfully, the source of inspiration for the change was the desire to give students an opportunity to engage in civic discourse in a civil fashion—basically a modest antidote to the pervasive Internet troll mentality and the attempt to muddle people's ability to discern false statements. As a result, that semester, whenever I would see a possible connection with the daily news and what we were discussing in class that day, I gave students a few minutes at the beginning of class to share their comments on the event with the other classmates. To be

clear, I was not asking students to discuss the current event because I believed that the very same event had already occurred in the past and all there was left to do was to use the present to better understand what we were studying in history (that is, I was not equating and collapsing the past with the present). It was more about asking the students to consider how a current problem that requires an explanation and interpretation can be understood. Indeed, the aim of the activity was to provide a mental exercise to show students the multiplicity of reasons and perspectives involved in making sense of an event. For instance, the week I was teaching the paradigm shift initiated by the Scientific Revolution that eventually led to the modern worldview, news outlets were insistently covering President Donald Trump's plan to withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement. The media were also giving ample space to supporters and opponents of such a decision. Listening to the debate, I was especially intrigued by how laypersons were using scientific evidence in support or against specific environmental policies and international agreements. I thought that the questioning of scientific knowledge using faith-based, anecdotal, or economic arguments could be used in the classroom to help students understand the multiple voices emerging when an established worldview is being questioned. One day, I started the class by asking students to share the arguments for and against the withdrawal, and how we may explain such views within the current political and cultural context. When I offered this activity, students were eager to talk and presented differing interpretations of the meaning and significance of the event. Several students had strong political opinions about the issue and my job was to remind them that the purpose of the session was not to convince the class that one idea was better than any other, but to hear the multiplicity of views. I wrapped up the session with a brief summary of the perspectives presented, a short reflection on the intricacies involved in the understanding the meaning of the event, and then I transitioned into that day's historical topic, making sure to frame the class in such a way that the striking contextual differences between the present and the past were clear to everybody.

When I first did this exercise, I was not aware of the correlation between students' awareness of their personal views and the role that their engagement with history at a personal level plays in their epistemic growth. I had to wait for the following semester to refine the exercise and determine the potential benefits of the activity.

Epistemic Cognition through Current Affairs: Sample Exercise

The first key point that emerged from my investigation is that looking at the history classroom through the lens of epistemic cognition may help teachers reflect on their teaching and thus better understand students' learning. Without going to the extent of administering the BHQ, history teachers could ask students to reflect on their conceptions of the nature of historical knowledge and then use their answers to detect the potential disconnect between their own epistemic views and those of the students. Questions like "What does it mean to think historically?" and "How is historical knowledge created?" may give us an initial understanding of students' epistemic stances and what we need to work on to help them progress. Relatedly, my experience seemed to indicate the need to explicitly investigate epistemological assumptions and discuss the epistemological problems involved in the construction of historical knowledge. Sharing with the students an actual example of what historical interpretation is (even a single class period in which we introduce students to a historical issue from a historiographical perspective) may help open their minds to the complexities of historical interpretation. Additionally, my investigation suggested that giving students the chance to discuss current affairs in the history classroom may actually help them think about history in a more sophisticated fashion. The problems arising from bringing political issues to the history class are daunting, but I believe they are tractable if the activity is framed appropriately.

Recently, in my upper-level twentieth-century European history course, we had been reading German and Italian sources from the 1930s. Students' attention focused on the various ways witnesses made sense of the coeval manifestations of violence. Right around the same time we were discussing this material, a major hate crime occurred in the United States. I found that the ensuing debate on the causes behind this shooting could be used in class to help students work with the search for meaning that arises when violence strikes. In class, I showed my students some of the statements the alleged shooter had been posting on social media, then I asked them to reflect on how such a horrific attack may be explained. I told them very clearly and multiple times that my role was to facilitate the sharing of views among students and not provide my own interpretation. Some

students in the class stated that the alleged shooter was just another “crazy guy with a gun.” Others mentioned the current overheated political climate that encourages some extremists to act in violent ways. My role during the session was to ask more questions so that students could clarify their answers or back them up with more evidence, and encourage more students to share their views.

Running the session was not easy: I did not want to lead the conversation in any specific direction, nor did I want students to think we were instead engaging in a debate, going back and forth trying to find a final, single explanation for the massacre. Additionally, the discussion did not address some of the problems I was hoping would emerge, and at times I was tempted to ask questions that would raise those issues, but then I decided against a strong intervention to avoid imposing a specific line of interpretation. I closed the session with a brief discussion on the importance of considering multiple views when trying to understand an event, the context in which those views emerged, and ultimately the need to provide an interpretation of the event. I then moved to the review of the historical context of Europe in the 1930s, emphasizing the differences with the present, and then to the discussion of the sources. I used the last five minutes of the class to ask students to share comments about the exercise. Some students stated that they appreciated the activity, but they were hoping we would spend more time on the discussion because they love to debate. Others found the activity stimulating because they had never thought that a single event could be perceived and understood in so many different ways. A few said that, while they had strong views on the issue, they found it useful to hear their classmates’ ideas and “could see why they held such stances.” Several students told me that the activity helped them think more deeply about their beliefs, but they definitely needed more time to reflect on the ideas that had emerged in the discussion. When I asked them if the activity was actually useful in helping them understand why people living in the 1930s interpreted the acts of violence in differing ways, all students agreed that it did. Still somewhat bewildered, they also hinted at the inescapable need to *interpret* those sources in their historical context. All of them wanted more time to discuss the current political climate, but I gently told them that all I could do was initiate the conversation that then could be continued outside class. I used this exercise on several other occasions (the recent commemorations honoring the

end of World War I gave me many opportunities to bring official speeches from various world leaders to the classroom and then ask students to interpret what they meant) and, each time, I got similar results and comments. What follows are specific guidelines for the activity I have developed from my experience.

Epistemic Cognition through Current Affairs: Guidelines

My first suggestion for the discussion is to pick a current issue that is still not well understood and that could provide a multitude of interpretations. It is also essential to avoid using current events to stir students towards the instructor's way of understanding the present, as at this point, students are still searching for meaning rather than for a simple, pre-packaged answer. To be clear, the connection between the current event and historical content should not be rooted in simplistic similarities that flatten our thinking, but instead be inspired by an uncertainty in our understanding and a genuine desire to investigate together a *problem*. Indeed, the event should be used as the manifestation of a much more complex issue that demands to be interpreted.

The second recommendation is to make clear that the goal of the exercise is to promote epistemological questioning rather than impose political views on others. It is also essential to keep the session short: seven to ten minutes at the beginning of class are enough to bring the contemporary world into the history classroom and stimulate student thinking. Next, after presenting the issue, instead of nonchalantly asking students what they think about it, I recommend asking them to state how the issue may be explained, why they hold that stance, the evidence supporting it, and how the issue may be understood in the broader political, cultural, and social context. Hopefully, students will get involved in a lively exchange of ideas in which multiple perspectives are discussed. Since the purpose of the exercise is to help students reflect on their political and personal views and the challenges involved in interpreting the meaning of an event, it is the responsibility of the instructor to manage the conversation along the lines of self-reflection and mutual understanding—and never as a political debate. The transition to the discussion of the historical material must be done with great attention to avoid making simplistic comparisons. Last, in addition to

the epistemological challenges involved in understanding the event, the instructor needs to address contextual differences between the present and the historical period investigated.

Conclusion

The clearest message that emerges from the scholarship of teaching and learning in history, the work of the educational researchers, and my small study is that students of history have a hard time fully comprehending how historical knowledge is constructed. We need, therefore, to address epistemological issues *explicitly* and *persistently* in our classes if we want our students to be at ease with the interpretational nature of historical knowledge. Additionally, a familiarity with students' three main epistemic stances about history (objectivist, subjectivist, and criterialist) could inspire us to evaluate students' historical knowledge from an epistemological perspective and adjust our instruction based on that interpretation of their work.

Additionally, an approach to history teaching that does not shy away from discussing the complexity behind the creation of historical knowledge would also help students become comfortable with dealing with ill-defined problems—that is, problems that defy straight-forward, clear, and simple answers. Such “soft skill” is greatly appreciated in the world of work. As Lendol Calder and Tracy Steffes have suggested in their work on the importance of measuring college learning in history, the workplace needs leaders able to deal with complex questions and innovative answers, and history majors who have been exposed to “good history teaching” should be well-prepared to excel in such environment.³⁴

Of course, a class environment that encourages epistemological questioning would serve as a good model to students who plan to become social studies teachers. Indeed, research shows that teachers need to have a good grasp of all epistemic issues involved in history to be confident enough to move away from a “facts only” mode of instruction.³⁵

Epistemic-centered history pedagogy could also help teachers better understand their own epistemic beliefs and how these views influence their teaching choices.³⁶ Perusing our syllabi, lectures, and assignments to reach a deeper understanding of the reasons behind our preferred modes of teaching may encourage us to make

our expectations more transparent to our audience and make sure they align with those of students, thus filling the miscommunication gap so common in the history classroom.

Additionally, in a post-truth, “fake news” world, the commitment to helping students make sense of how knowledge is achieved should define any history teacher’s work because it has become apparent that in the twenty-first century, epistemological sophistication is a core quality of a well-educated person. Sam Wineburg and his team provide easy access to a wealth of material teachers can use to help students become shrewd users of “information.”

The research also shows that a self-awareness of one’s personal beliefs and how they interact with doing history seems to be just as important as the rigorous application of the historical method. Indeed, if doing history is to ask students to “enter a contested discourse in which they produce their own judgments and argue for them on the basis of historical evidence,”³⁷ we need to provide them with opportunities for (judgment-free) self-reflection so that they can better understand what their beliefs are and how those beliefs interact with the material they are learning. An approach to history teaching that places equal emphasis on content and epistemic questions certainly seems the appropriate environment for this kind of activity to take place.

Although I do not have any definite evidence to argue that bringing current affairs to the history classroom does contribute to students’ epistemic growth (a subject for a different study), my experience seems to indicate that they still are significant benefits to this activity. My modest experience seems to indicate that students crave the opportunity to engage in conversations about current issues and the history classroom could provide a suitable environment for a civil exchange of views that could help students reflect on their own views and that of others—all of which contribute to a more personal approach to their learning. Depending on the instructor’s ability to find effective connections with the present and the past, and the similarities and differences between the two, the activity could also provide students the basic *epistemological* tools to start to make sense of our convoluted present that begs for discernment.

In sum, a classroom epistemic climate that consistently nurtures epistemological questioning may help all of us (students and teachers) understand what we once did not even have the words to express.

Notes

1. The 2016 History Discipline Core is available at the American Historical Association's website, at <<https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/tuning-the-history-discipline/2016-history-discipline-core>>. See also Anne Hyde, "Confessions from the Field: Building Assessments with the History Discipline Core," *Perspectives on History* 53, no. 1 (January 2015): 19, <<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2015/confessions-from-the-field-building-assessments-with-the-history-discipline-core>>.

2. For a discussion of the opportunities and limits of the History Tuning Project, see Daniel J. McInerney, "Tuning the Discipline of History in the United States: Harmony (and Dissonance) in Teaching and Learning," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 16, no. 4 (October 2017): 337-357; Elizabeth Belanger, "Using US Tuning to Effect: The American Historical Association's Tuning Project and the First Year Research Paper," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 16, no. 4 (October 2017): 385-402; and David Pace, "Thoughts on History, Tuning and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the United States," *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 16, no. 4 (October 2017): 415-419. See also James Grossman, "Tuning in to the History Major," *Perspectives on History* 50, no. 4 (April 2012): 7-8; and Christopher L. Doyle's letter to the editor, "On Historians, Tuning, and Markets," *Perspectives on History* 50, no. 6 (September 2012), <<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2012/letter-to-the-editor-on-historians-tuning-and-markets>>; and James Grossman's response to Doyle, "Response to On Historians, Tuning, and Markets," *Perspectives on History* 50, no. 6 (September 2012), <<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/september-2012/letter-to-the-editor-response-to-on-historians-tuning-and-markets>>.

3. For an overview of how old this discussion is, see Joel M. Sipress and David J. Voelker, "The End of the History Survey Course: The Rise and Fall of the Coverage Model," *The Journal of American History* 97, no. 4, (March 2011): 1050-1066.

4. Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Towards a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4, (March 2006): 1362.

5. Calder, "Uncoverage," 1363.

6. Joan Middendorf and David Pace, "Decoding the Disciplines: A Model for Helping Students Learn Disciplinary Ways of Thinking," in "Decoding the Disciplines: Helping Students Learn Disciplinary Ways of Thinking," special issue, *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, no. 98 (Summer 2004): 1-12.

7. Sipress and Voelker, "The End of the History Survey Course," 1063.

8. For more information on Sam Wineburg and the Stanford History Education Group, see <<https://sheg.stanford.edu/>>.

9. Victoria Krupnik, Timothy Fukawa-Connelly, and Keith Weber, "Students' Epistemological Frames and Their Interpretation of Lectures in Advanced Mathematics," *The Journal of Mathematical Behavior* 49 (March 2018): 2.

10. Krupnik, Fukawa-Connelly, and Weber, “Students Epistemological Frames,” 1-10. See also Edward F. Redish, “A Theoretical Framework for Physics Education Research: Modeling Student Thinking,” in *Proceedings of the International School of Physics, “Enrico Fermi,” Varenna, Como Lake: Course CLVI: Research on Physics Education*, ed. E. F. Redish and M. Vicentini (Amsterdam, Netherlands: IOS Press, 2003).

11. David Pace, “Decoding the Reading of History: An Example of the Process,” in “Decoding the Disciplines: Helping Students Learn Disciplinary Ways of Thinking,” special issue, *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, no. 98 (Summer 2004): 13.

12. Samuel S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001).

13. Joel M. Sipsess and David J. Voelker. “From Learning History to Doing History: Beyond the Coverage Model,” in *Exploring Signature Pedagogies: Approaches to Teaching Disciplinary Habits of Mind*, ed. Regan A. R. Gurung, Nancy L. Chick, and Aeron Haynie (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2009), 23.

14. For another example of miscommunication in the history classroom, see Joel M. Sipsess, “Why Students Don’t Get Evidence and What We Can Do About It,” *The History Teacher* 37, no. 3 (May 2004): 351-363. Bob Bain also provides examples of miscommunications (especially students’ belief that history is the study of facts). See Bob Bain, “Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction,” in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 331-352.

15. Krista R. Muis and Melissa C. Duffy, “Epistemic Climate and Epistemic Change: Instruction Designed to Change Students’ Beliefs and Learning Strategies and Improve Achievement,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 105, no. 1 (February 2013): 213-225.

16. Sipsess and Voelker, “From Learning History to Doing History,” 20.

17. Barbara K. Hofer, “Epistemic Cognition as a Psychological Construct: Advancements and Challenges,” in *Handbook of Epistemic Cognition*, ed. Jeffrey A. Greene, William A. Sandoval, and Ivar Bråten (New York: Routledge, 2016), 20. For an overview on the origins of this thriving field, see also Barbara Hofer and Paul R. Pintrich, “The Development of Epistemological Theories: Beliefs about Knowledge and Knowing and Their Relation to Learning,” *Review of Educational Research* 67, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 88-140.

18. Their framework borrows from the developmental models created by William Perry and Patricia King and Karen Kitchener, as well as the empirical data and analysis of Peter Lee, Denis Shemilt, and Rosalyn Ashby. For a good summary of William Perry’s theory, see Craig E. Nelson, “On the Persistence of Unicorns: The Trade-Off between Content and Critical Thinking Revisited,” in *The Social Worlds of Higher Education: Handbook for Teaching in a New Century*, ed. Bernice A. Pescosolido and Ronald Aminzade (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1999), 168-184. See also Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt, “A Scaffold, not a Cage: Progression and Progression Models in History,”

Teaching History, no. 113 (December 2003): 13-23; and Peter Lee and Rosalyn Ashby, "Progression in Historical Understanding Among Students Age 7-14," in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000): 199-222.

19. Bruce VanSledright explains his model best in two articles. For the sake of clarity, I used both publications in this section. See Bruce VanSledright and Kimberly Reddy, "Changing Epistemic Beliefs? An Exploratory Study of Cognition Among Prospective History Teachers," *Revista Tempo e Argumento* 6, no. 11 (January/April 2014): 28-68; and Bruce VanSledright and Liliana Maggioni, "Epistemic Cognition in History," in *Handbook of Epistemic Cognition*, ed. Jeffrey A. Greene, William A. Sandoval, and Ivar Bråten (New York: Routledge, 2016): 128-145.

20. VanSledright and Reddy, "Changing Epistemic Beliefs?" 34.

21. VanSledright and Reddy, "Changing Epistemic Beliefs?" 58.

22. VanSledright and Maggioni, "Epistemic Cognition in History," 136. The authors use Allan Megill's definition of objectivity as developed in the "four senses of objectivity" (namely, absolute sense of objectivity, disciplinary sense of objectivity, dialectic sense of objectivity, and procedural sense of objectivity). See Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 112-124.

23. There are a few very similar questionnaires with slightly different names that Bruce VanSledright and Liliana Maggioni have created. I used the one Maggioni employed to collect data for her doctoral dissertation. See Liliana Maggioni, "Studying Epistemic Cognition in the History Classroom: Cases of Teaching and Learning to Think Historically," (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 2010), 356, available at <<https://drum.lib.umd.edu/handle/1903/10797>>. For interesting reflections on the opportunities and limitations of this instrument, see Gerhard Stoel, Albert Logtenberg, Bjorn Wansink, Tim Huijgen, Carla van Boxtel, and Jannet van Drie, "Measuring Epistemological Beliefs in History Education: An Exploration of Naïve and Nuanced Beliefs," *International Journal of Educational Research* 83 (2017): 120-134.

24. VanSledright and Maggioni, "Epistemic Cognition in History," 138.

25. VanSledright and Maggioni, "Epistemic Cognition in History," 139.

26. VanSledright and Maggioni, "Epistemic Cognition in History," 140.

27. VanSledright and Reddy, "Changing Epistemic Beliefs?" 44.

28. VanSledright and Reddy, "Changing Epistemic Beliefs?" 44.

29. For a recent discussion on the issue, see Molly Worthen, "The Misguided Drive to Measure 'Learning Outcomes,'" *The New York Times*, 23 February 2018, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/23/opinion/sunday/colleges-measure-learning-outcomes.html>>.

30. All names of students are pseudonyms.

31. Alan Booth, *Teaching History at University: Enhancing Learning and Understanding* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 73.

32. Booth, *Teaching History at University*, 15.

33. Booth, *Teaching History at University*, 6.

34. Lendol Calder and Tracy Steffes, “Measuring College Learning in History,” in *Improving Quality in American Higher Education: Learning Outcomes and Assessments for the 21st Century*, ed. Richard Arum, Josipa Roksa, and Amanda Cook (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 65.

35. Bjorn Gert-Jan Wansink, Sanne Akkerman, and Theo Wubbels, “The Certainty Paradox of Student History Teachers: Balancing Between Historical Facts and Interpretation,” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 56 (May 2016): 94-105.

36. For a fascinating overview of how teachers’ specific disciplinary beliefs influence their pedagogy, see Alan Booth, *Teaching History at University*, 52-58.

37. Sipress and Voelker, “From Learning History to Doing History,” 26.

Appendix A

Beliefs about History Questionnaire (BHQ)
(Adapted from Liliana Maggioni)

Directions: For the items below, please CIRCLE the number that best reflects your level of disagreement/agreement with the given statement.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. It is fundamental that students are taught to support their reasoning with evidence.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. History is simply a matter of interpretation.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. A historical account is the product of a disciplined method of inquiry.	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. Students who read many history books learn that the past is what the historian makes it to be.	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. Disagreement about the same event in the past is always due to lack of evidence.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. Good students know that history is basically a matter of opinion.	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. Students need to be taught to deal with conflicting evidence.	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. Historical claims cannot be justified, since they are simply a matter of interpretation.	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. Good general reading and comprehension skills are enough to learn history well.	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. Since there is no way to know what really happened in the past, students can believe whatever story they choose.	1	2	3	4	5	6
11. History is a critical inquiry about the past.	1	2	3	4	5	6
12. The past is what the historian makes it to be.	1	2	3	4	5	6

13. Comparing sources and understanding author perspective are essential components of the process of learning history.	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. It is impossible to know anything for sure about the past, since no one of us was there.	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. Knowledge of the historical method is fundamental for historians and students alike.	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. The facts speak for themselves.	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. Students need to be aware that history is essentially a matter of interpretation.	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. Reasonable accounts can be constructed even in the presence of conflicting evidence.	1	2	3	4	5	6
19. Even eyewitnesses do not always agree with each other, so there is no way to know what happened.	1	2	3	4	5	6
20. Teachers should not question students' historical opinions, only check that they know the facts.	1	2	3	4	5	6
21. History is the reasonable reconstruction of past occurrences based on the available evidence.	1	2	3	4	5	6
22. There is no evidence in history.	1	2	3	4	5	6

Range: Strongly Agree = +3 to Strongly Disagree = -3

(Strongly Agree) 6 = +3 (Agree) 5 = +2 (Somewhat Agree) 4 = +1
 (Somewhat Disagree) 3 = -1 (Disagree) 2 = -2 (Strongly Disagree) 1 = -3

Subjectivist statements: 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 22 MAX SCORE: -24

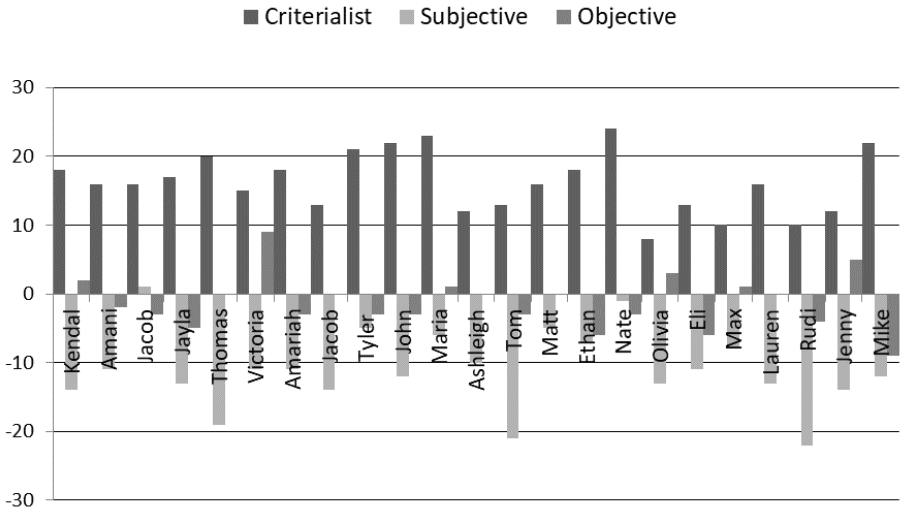
Objectivist statements: 5, 9, 16, 19, 20 MAX SCORE: -12

Criticalist statements: 1, 3, 7, 11, 13, 15, 17, 18, 21 MAX SCORE: 27

Note: Data analysis seems to suggest most students misinterpret statement 17 as a subjectivist statement.

Appendix B

Summary Results for Beliefs about History Questionnaire (BHQ)



Appendix C

Free-Response/Open-Ended Questionnaire

Directions: For the items below, check all the statements that best apply to you. For the remaining questions, please try to be specific in your answers.

- I am the first one in my family to go to a four-year college.
- I grew up in a conservative home.
- I grew up in a progressive home.
- I grew up in a home where religion played a very important role.
- I grew up in a home where religion did not play a very important role.

1. How would you describe your political views? Please try to be specific.
2. How would you describe your religious views? Please try to be specific.
3. What does it mean to think historically? Be very specific with your answer.
4. Where do you think historical knowledge comes from? Do you think historians may disagree on what that is? Why?
5. How do you think your political views have shaped your willingness to engage with material covered in a history course? In other words, was there a time in which you did not really want to learn something covered in a history class because you thought it was against your political views?
6. How do you think your views on religion have shaped your willingness to engage with material covered in a history course? In other words, was there a time in which you did not really want to learn something covered in a history class because you thought it was against your religious views?
7. How do you think your upbringing has shaped your willingness to engage with material covered in a history course?

Appendix D

Summary Results for Free-Response Questionnaire

Student	Major	Level	Political and religious views and upbringings	Discusses/describes some kind of intrapersonal dialogue with material
Kendal	History	Senior	Conservative Religious First Gen	Yes: "I do not take anything at face value."
Amani	History	Junior	Conservative Non-religious	No: "My political views did not affect my willingness to learn. I was open to every concept."
Jacob	History	Junior	Politics and religion were never really discussed	No: "I am always open to new ideas and I absolutely love to learn anything."
Jayla	History	Senior	Progressive Religious First Gen	Yes: "I wrestle with my own bias all the time."
Thomas	Political Science (History Minor)	Senior	Progressive Non-religious	Yes: "I use my atheism to filter most if not all the material through."
Victoria	History	Junior	Politics and religion were never really discussed First Gen	No: "No. There was never a time where I did not want to learn something because of my political or religious views."
Amariah	History	Junior	Conservative Religious	Yes: "To think historically you really have to remove yourself from the topic. You have to look at the facts and the events, understand that there is more to it and take away your own biases and emotions (something I struggle w/constantly)."
Jacob	Int'l Studies (History Minor)	Junior	Progressive Religious	No: "Never really happened to me. I always enjoy learning and do not really care what it is about as long as I learn."
Tyler	Political Science	Senior	Conservative Religious First Gen	Yes: "I had a hard time with some of the pre-modern ideas. I am such a product of the Enlightenment."
John	History	Senior	Conservative Non-religious First Gen	Yes: "I have disagreed on several things."

Maria	History	Senior	Conservative Religious First Gen	Yes: "My religious views very much affected my learning."
Ashleigh	History	Junior	Progressive Religious	No: "My political and religious views never distracted me from my learning"
Tom	History	Junior	Conservative Religious First Gen	No: "My political views had no influence."
Matt	History	Junior	Conservative Religious	Yes: "I was raised to be very patriotic, so it was hard to learn some of the horrible acts the United States committed. At the same time, I chose to embrace this information."
Ethan	Political Science/ Int'l Studies	Sophomore	Conservative Religion did not play an important role	Yes: "Everyone, even me, has a bias that needs to be understood through more research."
Nate	History	Senior	Conservative Religion did not play an important role	Yes: "Previous to entering college, I was raised in a conservative/ Republican household but a liberal arts education expanded my thoughts on education and helped me look at history not as facts but as interpretation of evidence."
Olivia	Psychology (History Minor)	Senior	Conservative Religious	No: "There was never a time that my political views influenced my learning."
Eli	Int'l Studies	Senior	Progressive Religious	Unclear: "History gives context to every person's 'why.'"
Max	History	Senior	Conservative Religious	No: "I am very open to read and learn about all types of material."
Lauren	History	Senior	Conservative Religious	Yes: "I had to realize that there was more."
Rudi	History	Junior	Apolitical Non-religious First Gen	No: "My political views did not interfere because my political views are limited."
Jenny	Int'l Studies	Senior	Progressive Religious	No: "I am a very open minded person and I love to learn."
Mike	Political Science/ History	Junior	Conservative Religious First Gen	Yes: "It does bother me when there are inconsistencies in the Bible and in history because it makes me feel that some religious texts and teachings are false, and it is hard to deal with sometimes."



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