

Introducing Public History

KEY TERMS

historical method
audience
collaboration
stakeholders
reflective practice
contextualized learning
banking and problem-posing models of education

dialogic history
free-choice learning
shared authority
setting problems
problem solving

WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT learning history, do you imagine sitting in a classroom and reading a textbook? The book you now hold introduces a different approach to history that focuses on engagement. *Introduction to Public History: Interpreting the Past, Engaging Audiences* addresses history that people encounter outside the classroom and beyond the traditional history text. Its chapters guide you, the student, through an initial encounter with the field of public history, introducing you to underlying issues, theories, and core principles that ground the field. This book focuses on the big questions that underpin the how and, most importantly, the why of public history.

What Is Public History?

Public history is so diverse that even practitioners struggle to define it succinctly. In 1978, historian Robert Kelley, who founded one of the early graduate programs in public history, wrote, "Public history refers to the employment of historians and the historical method

outside of academia.”¹ If we agree that academia is a term used to describe institutions of higher learning like colleges and universities, then what is “outside of academia”? You can find public history at a museum, in a historic house, on a walking tour of a historic district, or on YouTube. Public historians can produce documentaries, historical markers, and smartphone apps. The field is broad enough to include more ephemeral venues as well: a community event, a theatrical performance, a folk-art demonstration. There are more forms of public history than we can name here, and new ones appear all the time, which is one of the things that makes the field vibrant and exciting.

But the question of venue—“inside the academy” vs. “everywhere else”—does not capture all of the differences between public history and traditional academic history. Before we look at those differences, however, we must recognize what all historians share with one another. This is what Kelley called, in his definition, the “historical method.” All forms of history begin in the same place: with solid historical research based on a rigorous examination of available sources. All historians, regardless of where they work or who makes up their audience, rely on the systematic and critical examination of sources within their historical contexts to reveal stories of the past, to explain change and continuity over time, to consider contingency, and to reconcile competing versions of past events as preserved in a variety of historical sources. Through this process, we assign meaning to the past, taking a wide range of materials and using them to form a coherent argument about the meaning and significance of past events. These practices make up the **historical method**. Historians place their work within the context of what we already know and make efforts to contribute to that knowledge by using sources that have not been used before, by asking new questions of familiar sources, or by using sources in novel ways. The centrality of the historical method to public history is the reason you will find “Thinking Historically” as the next chapter in this textbook.

If public history and academic history share similar research methods and interpretive standards, what distinguishes them from one another? Some key concepts stand out for public history:

1. **Audience.** The audience is public, not academic. Public historians think differently about audience than they would when sharing their research in academic circles. The general public does not think about their own pasts or their relationship with the past the same way historians think about history. Understanding the audience means understanding what different publics expect and value when it comes to engaging in historical exploration. This textbook will introduce you to several different theoretical perspectives that help us work more effectively and ethically with public audiences.
2. **Collaboration.** Public historians practice two types of collaboration. First, they collaborate with the public. Public historians need to think beyond how they will best serve the public’s needs as audiences or consumers of history, and to think carefully about how they will work with **stakeholders**—those who have a specific interest or a stake in the topics we study, the communities about which we write, or the institutions or places where we work. Stakeholders might include the people whose story a public history project will tell, board members at a public history institution,

fundors, or politicians. Stakeholders are also potential members of the audience, but we distinguish them because of the specific relationships they have with the history being interpreted. Collaboration with the stakeholders whose history is being told is one of the defining features of public history work. The second form of essential collaboration requires work with professionals in other disciplines. Since public history involves skills that go beyond those of a historian, public historians collaborate with scholars and experts in other fields. Academic historians often work alone to produce a monograph; public historians work in teams to produce projects.

3. **Reflective Practice.** Public historians intentionally incorporate what they learn from the successes and failures of their professional experiences into future interpretive and engagement strategies. All historians have ethical responsibilities. We must represent primary sources fairly and accurately and acknowledge when we draw on the work of other scholars in our own work. Public historians have added ethical responsibilities that require many layers of reflective practice that will be discussed throughout the book.

Audience

Who Is the Public? What Is Their Relationship with “History” and “The Past”?

If one of the major defining characteristics of public history is a public audience, then who is this “public” and what is their relationship with history, or what some prefer to call “the past”? In 1994 and 1995, a group of historians conducted extensive phone interviews with 1,453 Americans in an attempt to explore how they understand their pasts and interact with history. In *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (1998), historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen interpreted the interviews and argued that Americans actively engaged with the past as they sought to understand the forces that had shaped the individual people that they were in the present and that would affect the people they wanted to become in the future. The survey respondents also expressed strong preferences for how they got information about the past. They trusted museums the most, with personal accounts from relatives following closely in second place, and firsthand accounts from someone who had been present at an event in third place. College professors, high school teachers, and nonfiction books still held some credence, but participants ranked movies and television programs as the least trustworthy (table 1.1). Americans also told the researchers they wanted to be able to assess what they learned from any source against their own previous knowledge and draw conclusions for themselves. Before Rosenzweig and Thelen, historians had not spent much energy analyzing their audience. While museum studies scholars and practitioners were already thinking deeply about audience reactions to exhibitions and museum visits, Rosenzweig and Thelen looked at people’s relationship with the past in the totality of their lives. Their study remains our best source of information about the attitudes different populations have about their own relationship with history and the past, something that is not captured in visitor surveys about specific exhibitions.

Table 1.1. Trustworthiness of Sources of Information about the Past—By Racial/Ethnic Group

HOW TRUSTWORTHY DO YOU THINK ARE AS A SOURCE OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE PAST?	RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUPS				
	NATIONAL SAMPLE	WHITE	AFRICAN AMERICAN	MEXICAN AMERICA	PINE RIDGE OGLALA SIOUX
Museums	8.4 (778)	8.5 (608)	8.1 (283)	8.6 (185)	7.1 (176)
Personal accounts from your grandparents or other relatives	8.0 (789)	8.0 (615)	8.4 (289)	8.2 (189)	8.8 (181)
Conversations with someone who was there	7.8 (790)	7.8 (611)	7.9 (290)	8.2 (188)	8.0 (177)
College history professors	7.3 (692)	7.4 (537)	7.0 (261)	8.3 (172)	7.1 (161)
High school history teachers	6.6 (771)	6.7 (594)	6.2 (293)	7.5 (189)	5.9 (178)
Nonfiction books	6.4 (747)	6.4 (583)	5.6 (278)	6.6 (181)	5.4 (169)
Movies or television programs about the past	5.0 (783)	4.9 (610)	5.2 (291)	6.0 (189)	4.2 (180)

Respondents were asked about seven "places where people might get information about the past." They rated the trustworthiness of each "as a source of information about the past using a 1 to 10 scale," with 1 meaning "not at all trustworthy" and 10 meaning "very trustworthy." This table reports the mean score the national sample and four racial/ethnic groups gave the sources of information in the far-left column. The number in parentheses indicate the number of respondents on which each mean is based.

Table 1.2. Most Important Pasts—By Racial/Ethnic Group

KNOWING ABOUT THE PAST OF WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING FOUR AREAS OR GROUPS IS MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU?	RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUPS				
	NATIONAL SAMPLE	WHITE	AFRICAN AMERICAN	MEXICAN AMERICAN	PINE RIDGE OGLALA SIOUX
The past of your family	66%	69%	59%	61%	50%
The past of your racial or ethnic group	8%	4%	26%	10%	38%
The past of the community in which you now live	4%	3%	4%	7%	7%
The past of the United States	22%	24%	11%	22%	5%
	100% N=796	100% N=616	100% N=297	100% N=191	100% N=176

Respondents were asked the following question: "Knowing about the past of which of the following four areas or groups is most important to you—the past of your family, the past of your racial or ethnic group, the past of the community in which you now live, or the past of the United States?" This table reports the percentage of respondents in the national sample and four racial/ethnic groups that chose each of the pasts in the far left column.

Tables 1.1 and 1.2 are from Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) and are reproduced (with edited captions) with permission of the publisher from <http://chnm.gmu.edu/survey/tables.html>.

Experts in the science of learning have found that all humans learn within the contexts of their own experiences, just as the survey respondents from *The Presence of the Past* revealed. In their research on museum visitation, John Falk and Lynn Dierking found, "People make meaning through a constant process of relating past experiences to the present," connecting what is happening in the present to what has happened in the past.² It follows, then, that for public historians to engage their audiences in a meaningful experience, they must make history relevant to their lives. Understanding your audience should always come first, particularly if one primary goal is to facilitate this **contextualized learning**.

Diversity of Public Experiences

"The public" includes many different people with very different personal experiences. Diversity may come in the form of age, educational background, economic standing and class, religious diversity, different abilities, diversities of language, as well as cultural, racial, and ethnic diversities. Sometimes we can understand diversity of experience in terms of privilege or marginalization. For example, nondisabled people experience privilege every day whether they recognize it or not. A person with a disability might never see someone like themselves depicted in a public history venue. In fact, disability-rights advocates had to wage protests to add a statue of President Franklin D. Roosevelt sitting in a wheelchair to the FDR Memorial in Washington, DC, although his paralysis during his presidency is now widely known. *The Presence of the Past* revealed that Americans who had historically been marginalized, specifically African Americans, American Indians, Mexican Americans, and LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) individuals, often understood themselves to be part of a specific "collective past." African Americans, for example, used their understanding of the black past to distance themselves from an "official" version of the past organized around a dominant narrative that erased the experiences of their families and communities (table 1.2).³ Potential stakeholders and consumers of public history projects will approach the work through the lens of their own experiences; public history practitioners need to understand that phenomenon.

Because different segments of the public will approach history differently based on their own historically situated experiences, understanding your audiences is complex. You must look deeper when examining which publics you serve as a public historian in order to consider multiple layers of experience. For example, understanding basic demographic details of your audience may be a good start, but there are variations beyond typical profiles, such as age, economic levels, gender, race, ability, and ethnicity. It is easy to become complacent if we believe we have sufficiently considered more than one point of view. Our communities are always changing, and the needs and experiences of the public are always evolving. We must reexamine who our publics are and their historical and contemporary experiences in order to find ways for them to see themselves in the histories we interpret and represent.

Who Does the Public Trust?

Rosenzweig and Thelen found that the public trusts the history they learn about in museums more than any other source, for two very different reasons. First, people in the study concluded "museums arrived at their interpretations only after experts pooled their independent research."⁴ In other words, historians and professionals in other fields had worked with one another to develop interpretations; one interpretation had not been able to control the museum's agenda. Second, museum exhibits allow members of the public to interact directly with "real" objects from the past, devoid of interpretative



Photograph 1.1. Sandy Hanebrink poses by the wheelchair statue advocates added to the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, DC. Visitors want to see themselves reflected in public history interpretation. Courtesy of Sandy Hanebrink.

layers. This direct access provides an opportunity for the audience to test an exhibit against their previous knowledge about the subject matter and to make meaning of the past in terms of their own experiences and understanding. The public does not rely on, nor do they necessarily trust, academic historians to teach them history. They prefer to place their trust in the interpretations of the past that teams of experts present outside of classrooms, where they have unmediated access to the objects and pieces of the past to analyze and view for themselves. They prefer histories that can fit within their existing understanding of the past, and enjoy learning history in ways that inform their present and reaffirm their own identities.

Banking Education versus Problem-Posing Education

Another clear takeaway from Rosenzweig and Thelen's study is that rather than being told what to think, Americans prefer to participate in the intellectual process, asking questions and considering the possible answers in relation to their own experiences and new evidence. Rosenzweig and Thelen's findings can be understood further by applying Paulo Freire's **problem-posing model of education**.⁵ Freire is the theorist who helped education specialists think about banking versus problem posing as educational models. **Banking** is a model where knowledge, or in our case history, is delivered as facts prepared by the experts to be accepted by the learner and regurgitated later as proof that learning happened. This model could easily be represented by a multiple-choice test that you might have taken in a high-school history class. That kind of history—the kind the public often associates with the formal classroom—is of little use to them and was ranked well below other more trusted ways to encounter the past. In contrast, people actively absorb information about the past if they can use it to shape their own identities in the present and for the future. Freire observed this process as he developed a critical pedagogy for adult literacy education. This approach invited the public to grapple with questions and engage in the process of historical inquiry based on problems to be solved rather than content to be memorized. Problem-posing education has a liberating effect on people.

Problem-posing education empowers participants to see themselves as actors in constructing history, and it emboldens the public to participate as citizens in the shaping of the futures of their communities, cities, and nations. Problem posing, according to Freire, is at the heart of critical pedagogical praxis, which he defines as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.”⁶ By posing a problem to an audience and asking them to use their own experience and new knowledge to develop a solution, the teacher can encourage deep learning. When ordinary people are no longer the objects of education, but, Freire observed, are humanized through problem-posing education, they understand their own position in history. They can also see themselves as actors in the process of transformation. Freire wrote, “The banking method emphasizes permanence and becomes reactionary; problem-posing education—which accepts neither a ‘well-behaved’ present nor a predetermined future—roots itself in the dynamic present and becomes revolutionary.”⁷ Freire cautioned the expert “not to consider himself or herself the proprietor of history” or to become “the prisoner of a ‘circle of certainty,’” in which he or she claims to know all of the answers for everyone.⁸ Historians take pride in doing the reading, knowing the details, and supporting an argument with specific pieces of evidence. But public historians must welcome the

expertise of their audiences, especially stakeholders whose experiences can add to a richer understanding of the past. Inviting the audience into a dialogue instead of a lecture encourages engagement and can become a source of empowerment and even liberation for the people public historians serve. When individuals are able to take control of their own history, when they engage in a dialogical relationship with their own education, they see the work that historical understanding can do in the world.

Problem-Posing Education as “Dialogic” History

When you invite the public to participate in a conversation using common questions and shared inquiry as your approach, when you recognize that the public comes to historical inquiry with knowledge, you can engage them in a dialogue with the evidence and with your own research. In the context of public history, this exchange leads us to what theorists call **dialogic history**. The idea arises from the study of literature and suggests that people enjoy reading novels because they contain conversations between characters, as well as a dialogue between the author and the reader. When we read a novel, we enter this intimate space where we become a part of the conversation, too. Falk and Dierking have found, “Learning is a dialogue between the individual and his or her environment through time. Learning can be conceptualized as a contextually driven effort to make meaning in order to survive and prosper within the world.”⁹ If we approach the presentation of history to the public in this way, by inviting them into a conversation between the documents and objects and people who lived in the past, and even with historians or exhibition designers posing questions, then the visitor can likewise become a part of the conversation through dialogic history.¹⁰

Many public history projects approach history as dialogic history. The Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA), founded in 1980 as the New York Chinatown History Project, transformed itself into a dialogue-driven museum by examining the ways in which various people actively created what we know as New York’s Chinatown. This new focus required the intentional involvement of the past and present residents of Chinatown through a wide range of community-based approaches to collecting, researching, and interpreting the neighborhood’s history. As John Kuo Wei Tchen explained, “We want to fashion a learning environment in which personal memory and testimony inform and are informed by historical context and scholarship.” They began by rethinking the ways in which they involved the community in creating the content of the museum. MOCA conducted conversations with historians of Chinese American history, with Chinese Americans, with residents of the surrounding areas who are not Chinese, and with tourists. Those conversations brought new memories to light and raised new areas of study for the public historians. Including stakeholders in the research and collecting phase of the project added individual stories to the record, and what emerged was not one central narrative but a variety of points of view. Tchen also corrected historical trends that had erased Chinese Americans from history when he successfully pushed for the publication of Paul Chan Pang Siu’s *The Chinese Laundryman: A Study in Social Isolation*, a dissertation that the University of Chicago Press had declined to publish years earlier. Including the public in the earliest phases of research all the way through the exhibition itself and promoting scholarship where members of the public could see themselves and their families created a more meaningful experience. The liberating effect

that Freire wrote about was compounded when the museum conducted a series of community conversations where the public could discuss current immigration issues, demonstrating the power of actual dialogue in a museum setting to address issues that a community was grappling with in the present, as well as the past.¹¹

Tchen discovered that it was not enough to invite the community to an exhibition opening or a gala and expect that they would then become regular attenders and donors; one exhibition on a subject dear to a visitor will not lead her to become invested in the museum long term. Tchen learned that audience development is about more than effective communication of a single message or one historical investigation. The goal for many institutions is to create lasting ties with the community by involving them in every step of the collection and interpretation process.

Free-Choice Learning

When the public either consumes history or engages in public history experiences, they do so by choice in informal educational settings. **Free-choice learning** (also known as informal learning) is a term used to identify modes of learning that take place outside a standard classroom setting, such as museums, zoos, and historic sites, as well as television or film. Unlike in a standard classroom setting, there are no exams to pass and no pressure to engage with and retain the material. Rather, adults and children alike might engage with what is being presented or ignore it entirely. The public is free to choose what they will spend more of their time on, and what they will skip altogether. In fact, one director of a small regional museum once noted that many visitors entered the museum just to use the toilets!

Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig incorporated this idea of informal learning into a practice that became a Danish tradition in the mid-nineteenth century. Realizing that formal education was not meeting the needs of the poor, and inspired by Enlightenment thinking, Grundtvig believed that education must relate to people’s lives. Instead of placing expert teachers in front of a formal classroom where they would present knowledge to students—particularly adult learners who could not complete formal school, or graduates for whom a university education was not the next logical step—Grundtvig imagined an educational setting where students and teachers learned together in an environment based on communal living and shared inquiry. Without the need for tests or grades, in a place where class differences could be overcome, an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect would develop. The Grundtvig folk school model has inspired educational reform and even community organizing strategies far beyond the national boundaries of Denmark, well into the twentieth century. More recently, museum researcher John Falk has documented that most adults acquire new information through free-choice learning, an increasingly important way for young people to learn as well. If sparked by their own curiosity, adults who exercise control over their learning often continue their own exploration even after they leave the museum or walk away from the exhibition.¹² The original impetus for requiring history in public schools was to create good citizens for a strong democracy. Presumably the same goal holds for public history, even though the components may have changed. Still it is less important that visitors can remember the specific details of any one historical topic than that they engage in public history as a free choice, and as a result become lifelong learners.

Audiences can choose freely only if they encounter the material through a delivery method that works for them. The experience of Alaskan teenager Byron Nicholai demonstrates the importance of considering the audience when picking the delivery method. Nicholai, a teenage Yu'pik boy living in the remote village of Toksook Bay, Alaska, population 600, was the son of a single mother who had learned important cultural traditions, such as hunting and fishing, from his older cousins and uncles. When he was in sixth grade, his cousins passed on another legacy—drumming. Nicholai became fascinated by the history of his people, learning not only drumming patterns but also songs and dances. He wanted to share his historical knowledge with other teens, and his understanding of his audience led him to choose Facebook and YouTube as his delivery media. The CB/VHS radio had connected Native Alaskans for decades, but Nicholai's generation favored online platforms. Nicholai started posting videos of himself singing modern songs interlaced with words and phrases from his Yu'pik language.¹³ Reflecting on his work, Nicholai told the *Alaska Dispatch News*, "Teens nowadays are so modern. They are starting to think the traditional ways are boring. So what if I mixed them. They would still be into the modern, but they would learn more about the traditional, too."¹⁴ Soon he had 24,000 followers on Facebook, some from Alaska, some from other parts of the world. He went on tour around his state, discovering audiences of adoring fans who wanted to take selfies with him and who knew his Yu'pik songs word for word. By understanding his audience, this teenager has inspired young people to choose to learn the Yu'pik language and to embrace traditional cultural practices as relevant in their own modern lives.

Collaboration

Shared Authority with the Public

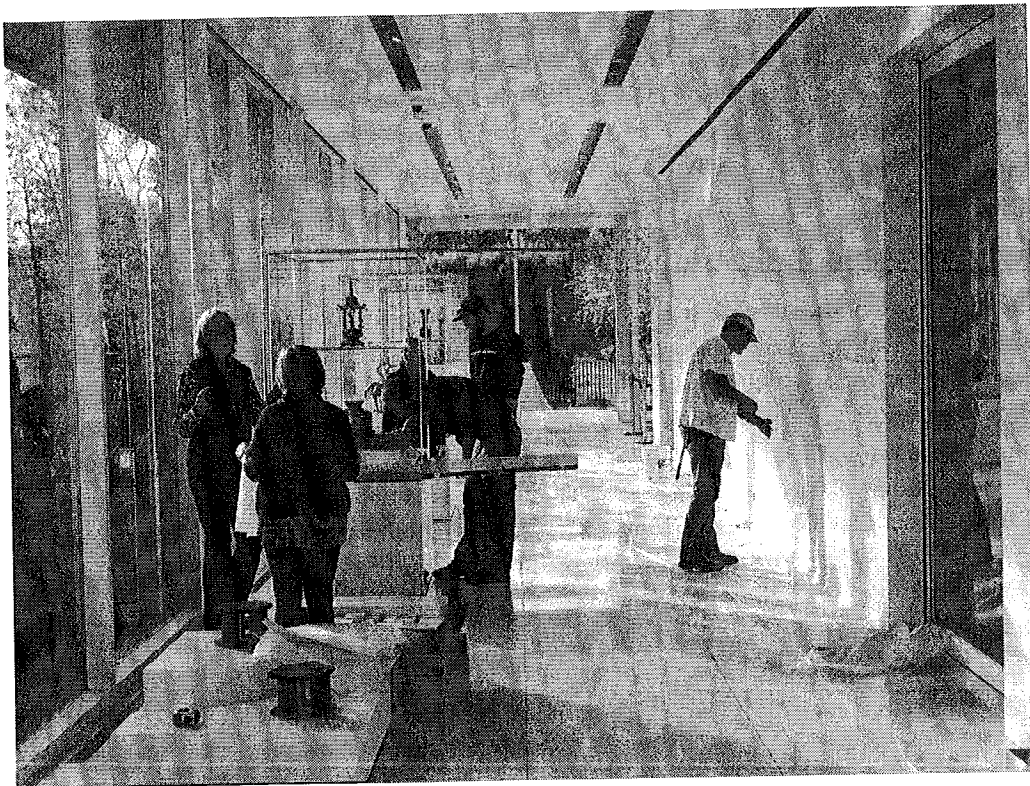
The public not only has choices about what they will learn and how they choose to relate to the past and to "history," but they also own their own histories. Respecting the public's ownership over their own history demands the recognition and practice of **shared authority**, a term Michael Frisch developed in his work as an oral historian.¹⁵ As Frisch describes it, this shared authority is inherent in the work of oral and public history because public historians are not the sole interpreters: "the interpretive and meaning-making process is in fact shared by definition—it is inherent in the dialogic nature of an interview, and in how audiences receive and respond to exhibitions and public history interchanges in general."¹⁶ Shared authority does not, however, require that public historians relinquish their expertise, but it does mean that public historians must be willing to do the work of collaboration, listening to and respecting diverse points of view, and seeking common ground whenever possible. Public historians share authority with stakeholders who seek to play a role in how the story of their people is being interpreted or how their money is being spent. We also share authority with the much wider audiences of our work. Although most of them will not play any role in the development or design of public history projects, they will still understand whatever we produce through the lens of their own worldviews, experiences,

and understandings. When a stakeholder or audience member disagrees with a historical narrative, public historians should see that moment as an opportunity to engage in further dialogue and reflection rather than as a roadblock. There are also significant ways to share authority with public history consumers, for example, through evaluation of museum exhibits and civic engagement, which will be discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

Collaborating with Other Disciplines

Public historians collaborate frequently with non-historians across disciplines. Academic historical research typically gives preference to textual sources, like legal documents, letters, diaries, and maps. Academic historians, trained to use these kinds of sources, typically work alone. But public historians often consult a wide range of textual and non-textual sources, some of which may require interdisciplinary research techniques or collaboration with individuals trained as archaeologists, anthropologists, historical and landscape architects, art historians, and curators, just to name a few. Public historians also work with professionals who have the expertise to create public history installations, including designers, artists, installation experts, lighting professionals, web developers, and institutional directors. The collaborative nature of public history points to one way in which it functions as its own field of study and its own professional endeavor, requiring that public historians understand the needs and expectations of the other professionals they work with and that they more clearly and self-consciously explain their work and their standards to non-specialists. Therefore, public historians become masters of mediation and interpretation both of their professional standards and of history itself.

Sunnylands, the winter estate of Walter and Leonore Annenberg in Rancho Mirage, California, is an example of a site where public historians successfully collaborate across disciplines every day. The house is a mid-century modern landmark, containing an extensive art collection, and the grounds boast a professional golf course. The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands offers guided tours of the historic estate and grounds. Through research on US and international political history, Sunnylands staff developed a script that university-student guides use to provide tours to the public fifteen times a day. This script tells the story of Walter and Leonore Annenberg and of their estate as a meeting place for current and past US presidents and world leaders. Now functioning as a high-end retreat center for world leaders, the complexity of the site requires more than a historical knowledge of the significance of the Annenbergs and their property. Sunnylands staff has collaborated with environmental resource specialists to model best practices in energy and water conservation in a desert environment, and with experts on hospitality to ensure the estate does not disappoint as a rarefied getaway for world leaders and high-profile guests. Experts in exhibit installation work with curators to display objects of interest in rotating exhibitions. Education specialists incorporate local high school students in scientific studies of the desert flora and fauna. The interdisciplinary efforts of the staff at Sunnylands and special contractors allow a diverse group of visitors to the estate, public center, and gardens to grasp the entire experience of Sunnylands, both its past and its present.



Photograph 1.2. Experts in exhibition installation work with Director of Collections & Exhibitions Anne Rowe (far left) to prepare a new exhibition at the Sunnylands Center & Gardens in Rancho Mirage, California, 2014. Courtesy of The Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands.

Reflective Practice

Public history requires collaboration across disciplines and with the public, but this collaboration can make it difficult to identify, agree upon, and maintain focus on one or more project goals. The ability to find end goals that everyone involved in a public history project can embrace, and the ability to identify the problems that are central to a large project, takes experience. This is not a technical endeavor with a set of steps that can be followed exactly to guarantee success. Donald A. Schön, author of *The Reflective Practitioner*, explored how problem setting and problem solving work together in nonscientific settings where the end goals of collaborative projects are not predetermined and there is no preset problem that everyone can identify as the end goal. Schön wrote:

Technical rationality depends on agreement about ends. When ends are fixed and clear, then the decision to act can present itself as an instrumental problem. But when the ends are confused and conflicting, there is as yet no “problem” to solve. A conflict of ends cannot be resolved by the use of techniques derived from applied research. It is rather through the non-technical process of framing a problematic situation that we may organize and clarify both the ends to be achieved and the possible means of achieving them.¹⁷

Public historians, like others, engage in reflective practice, drawing on what worked and what did not work from past experiences to “frame the problematic situation” to better understand how to approach the complexity and unpredictability of a new project.

Public historians cannot bring a team together effectively until they can identify the problems that will guide the team’s work. In the real world of multiple experts and stakeholders working together, the process it takes to identify the problems that will guide everyone’s work is messy. As Schön puts it, **setting problems** is the step before **problem solving**, in which a professional must “name the things to which we will attend and frame the context in which we will attend to them.” The problem-setting phase includes, for example, the process of determining who the stakeholders are in any given project, determining what they believe the outcomes of the project should be, and the process of bringing all of the stakeholders to the table to bring their disparate visions together into a single set of clearly identified problems.¹⁸

As public historians begin their careers, many are still learning how to collaborate or to appreciate the value of collaboration. Developing an exhibition on the history of a historically oppressed group or preserving a nineteenth-century slaveholder’s house on land understood as sacred to indigenous people without consulting those groups of stakeholders will likely result in an exhibition that leaves out these integral perspectives. According to Schön, the problems arise because inexperienced professionals pay more attention to problem solving than they do to problem setting. In other words, turning back to the example of the exhibition on the history of a historically oppressed group, a new public historian might immediately turn to what seems to her to be the problem at hand—primary and secondary source research about that historically oppressed group, so that she can begin developing that exhibition—instead of engaging in problem setting: bringing together stakeholders in the project to engage in dialogue with them to discover what they believe the key components of an interpretive exhibition might be. Consulting with stakeholders not only helps public historians maintain good community relations, but also, as you will read in chapter 3 in the case study of the *Baltimore ’68 Project*, it helps us discover which questions we should be asking. Knowing how to gain access to the people and to earn their trust in order to understand and identify the goals that various stakeholders may have for any given project can be difficult and may develop only over time. Learning from those who have done this work in the past is vital, but so is evaluating the steps you undertook—or the steps that you should have taken—to identify or set the problems of the project and to solve them. Reflective practice requires that the practitioner not only set and solve the problem then at hand but, throughout the work, also reflect on what is working and not working as lessons for future projects. The chart on the next page suggests how this process might work.

Ethics are not determined by consulting a master book of rules. Quite often you select the most ethical response from a list of imperfect choices. If you develop the ability to think through ethical dilemmas in the safety of a classroom setting when the stakes are really quite low, you will be much better equipped to carry on similar discussions with colleagues in the future when together you face decisions in situations that you or your organization did not anticipate. We hope that this book will jumpstart conversations and debates focusing on common themes that bring public historians together in order to better understand

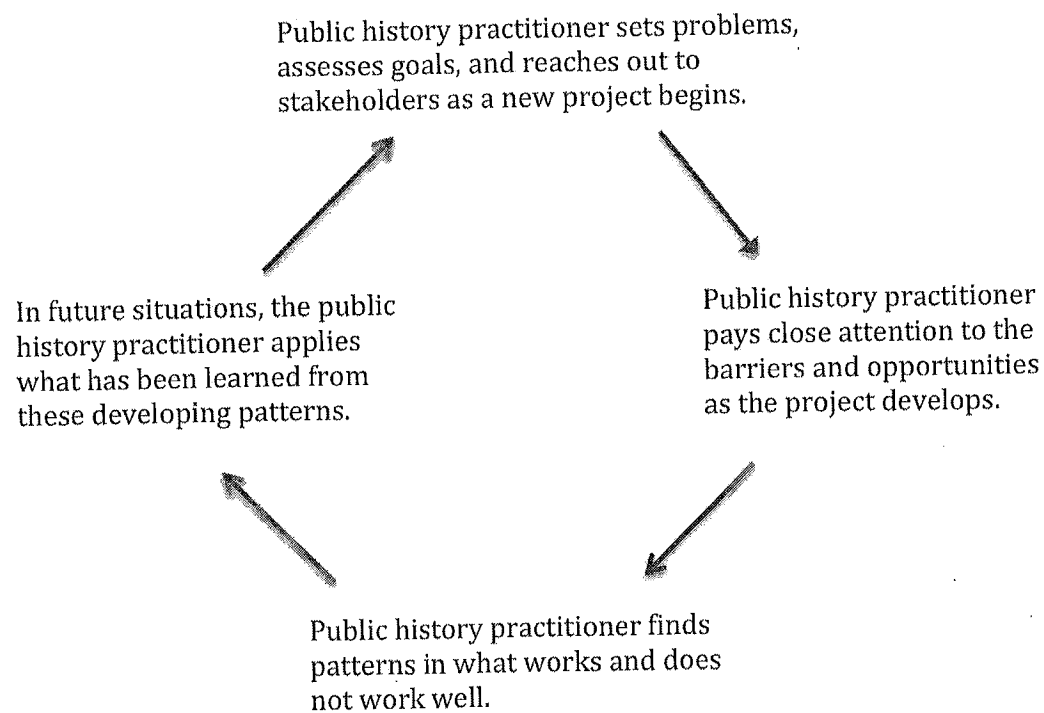


Figure 1.1. Reflective Practice in Public History. Adapted from David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, 2nd Ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2015), 32.

the underlying theories that inform the field of public history and to inspire curiosity for further study. We also hope that those who find that public history becomes for you more than a passing interest will follow up with internships and hands-on projects that will allow you to see how the principles introduced in this text compare with the day-to-day demands of working in the field.

Notes

1. Robert Kelley, "Public History: Its Origins, Nature, and Prospects," *The Public Historian* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1978): 16. doi: 10.2307/3377666.
2. John Falk and Lynn Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and The Making of Meaning* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2000), 61.
3. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 149–162.
4. Rosenzweig and Thelen, *Presence of the Past*, 108.
5. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th Anniversary Edition (New York: Continuum, 2006, 1968).
6. Freire, 51.
7. Freire, 84.
8. Freire, 39.

9. Falk and Dierking, *Learning from Museums*, 136.
10. For an explanation of the theoretical roots of "dialogic" as used in this case based on literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, particularly as used by Tony Bennett, see: Tony Bennett, "Exhibition, Difference and the Logic of Culture," in Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja, and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, eds., *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 46–69; and Mary Hutchinson and Lea Collins, "Translations: Experiments in Dialogic Representation of Cultural Diversity in Three Museum Sound Installations," *Museum and Society* 7, no. 2 (2009): 92–109.
11. John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Creating a Dialogic Museum: The Chinatown History Museum Experiment," in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Culture* (Washington, DC, and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 285–326, quotation on 286; John Kuo Wei Tchen and Liz Ševčenko, "The 'Dialogic Museum' Revisited: A Collaborative Reflection," in Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski, eds., *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World* (Philadelphia: Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 83.
12. John H. Falk, "The Director's Cut: Toward an Improved Understanding of Learning from Museums," *Science Education* 88, no. S1 (July 2004): S83–S96; and Falk, "Free-Choice Environmental Learning: Framing the Discussion," *Environmental Education Research* 11, no. 3 (2005): 265–280.
13. You can see Nicholai's work on his Facebook page "I Sing, You Dance."
14. Byron Nicholai, "I Sing, You Dance," *Alaska Dispatch News*, April 9, 2016, <http://www.adn.com/multimedia/video/video-byron-nicholai-i-sing-you-dance/2015/05/07/>. See also *The Atlantic*, August 4, 2015; *Salon*, February 12, 2016.
15. Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990).
16. Michael Frisch, "From *A Shared Authority* to the Digital Kitchen, and Back," in Adair, Filene, and Koloski, eds., *Letting Go?*, 127.
17. Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner* (London: Ashgate, 1991), 41.
18. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*, 40. One of the most insightful descriptions showcasing the traditional work of the historian working with primary sources as reflective practice is found in Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 17–22. Rebecca Conard identified reflective practice as one of the core elements of public history practice in "Public History as Reflective Practice: An Introduction," *The Public Historian* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 9–13.

RESOURCES AND SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Professional Organizations

Learn about the organizations that represent public historians. Below are some of those organizations. Read their mission statements, determine who they represent, take a look at their publications, newsletters, blogs, and consider following them on social media.

- American Association for the History of Medicine
- American Association for State and Local History
- American Alliance of Museums
- American Historical Association
- California Council for the Promotion of History
- Institute for the Public Understanding of the Past
- National Association for Interpretation
- National Council on Public History
- National Trust for Historic Preservation
- Oral History Association
- Organization of American Historians
- Society of American Archivists

History Where You Live

Visit History Museums in Your Area

Where are the history museums in your area? Is there a historic house or building associated with the museum? Is it focused on national, state, or local history? Who is their main target audience? How do they engage the public with the material? What types of collections do they have? What seems to be their main historical narrative? Is the narrative reflective of the community living in the area? Why or why not?

Visit a Historic Site

Think about how that site is interpreted for the public. You might take a tour, or search for a podcast about the site, or read plaques at the site, or visit an interpretive center. Before going, you should take a look at James Loewen's "Ten Questions to Ask at a Historic Site" available in his book, *Lies Across America*, appendix B, or online at: <http://sundown.afro.illinois.edu/content.php?file=liesacrossamerica-tenquestions.html>.

Visit Your Local Public Library

Explore the special collections or local history collections if your library has them, or explore any exhibitions that might be on display interpreting the history of the area. Talk to a reference librarian to learn about other resources that might be available for people interested in local history.

Visit Your Local College Library

Colleges often have archives filled with primary and secondary materials that shed light on local history. Often alumni, professors, and politicians donate collections to their school's special collections. You may also find oral histories, institutional records, and ephemera.

Visit a Historical Society in Your Area

Most historical societies host guest lectures or special events in the community. Find out when they have an event or lecture or meeting and pay them a visit. Find out who they are, when they became organized as a historical society, and why. Ask about their collections or resources and about their organization. Who are their members, and who are their officers? What is their mission and how do they raise money? What are their most treasured assets and/or stories? Volunteer to write an article for their newsletter.

Get Creative!

Drive, bike, or take a bus around your city or town and look for monuments, statues, plaques, murals, or other markers of historical places. Explore a historical district, or a part of town that contains buildings and/or homes that are older than fifty years. Pay attention to movies in theaters that are based on historical subjects. Notice television or internet series that are based even loosely on historical subjects or in historical periods. Talk to family members, neighbors, friends, or acquaintances about how things have changed in your city, your neighborhood, or your region. What are their fondest memories of places that have changed the most or that are still exactly as they remember them?

Need some ideas? There are many ways to find historical points of interest online or on your mobile devices. Here are just a few ideas to get you started.

- Curatescape Projects, <http://curatescape.org/projects/>
- History Pin, <http://www.historypin.org>
- Next Exit History, <http://nextexithistory.com>
- National Trust for Historic Preservation, <http://www.preservationnation.org>

Thinking Critically about Representation and Local History

After touring your own area and visiting some sites, museums, and libraries, and thinking about public representations of history, pause and think about how your local community, your region, your country, or another country represents its own history through the most public forms of representation, such as advertising and tourism, monuments or place names, festivals or other means. Below are some ways you might frame this discussion, but there are many ways to think critically about historical representations of history that are all around us. Discuss historic representation in your community, on campus, and in your region. How does it compare with the demographics of your community, campus, or region? Which groups see themselves most heavily represented? Which groups are invisible? Discuss strategies to improve representation on campus or in the community.

1. How does your town, city, or community represent itself to visitors and/or tourists? Is that representation accurate? Does it preference one group over others? Is it idealized? Does it use or ignore history to sell authentic experiences of place to visitors? Why or why not? To answer this question, you might visit your town, city, or regional office of tourism. States all have official offices of tourism and provide excellent opportunities for analysis. For example, visit sites that cater to tourists visiting a city, state, or country. You might have to dig a little to see what type of history this site portrays, but the history or “heritage” of a place is always either an explicit or implicit selling point.
2. How often are people of diverse gender, cultural, racial, and ethnic groups represented on monuments, plaques, wayside exhibitions, official historic sites, museums, and the like in your town, city, or region? How does the percentage of any one group in historical representations compare with the demographics of the area? One 2014 study found, for example, that while there are fifty statues in New York City’s Central Park, none of them represent real women (women who are not characters in fictional pieces of literature). Zero.¹ There are female fictional characters represented, including Alice in Wonderland, Juliet Capulet, and Mother Goose, but even these statues were created by men. By contrast, if you stroll through the park you might encounter Shakespeare, Beethoven, Simón Bolívar, Alexander Hamilton, or even the famous sled dog Balto. Nationally, within the United States fewer than 8 percent of public outdoor statues commemorating individuals are of women. Does it matter who we memorialize in sculptures in our public places? What does it tell us about which individual contributions in history publics value and what can you learn about efforts (or the lack thereof) to be more inclusive in public memorialization of historical figures in your country, your region, or your own community?

Note

1. Chloe Angyal, “Not One Woman Gets Her Own Pedestal among Central Park’s Statues,” September 5, 2014, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/09/05/real-women-belong-in-new-yorks-central-park>.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

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