



Article Review: Nemko, N. (2010). Are we creating a generation of ‘historical tourists’? Visual assessment as a means of measuring pupils’ progress in historical interpretation. *Teaching History*, 137.

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In “Are We Creating a Generation of ‘Historical Tourists’? Visual Assessment as a Means of Measuring Pupils’ Progress in Historical Interpretation” in the December 2009 issue of *Teaching History*, Barnaby Nemko, a British teacher, reflects on his experience taking grade seven to nine students on a trip to Ypres, Belgium to learn about World War I. His findings are relevant to all social studies teachers who wish their students to engage critically with historic interpretations of the past.

Nemko gave groups of five students a digital camera and instructed each group to take over one hundred photos, then choose ten photos that would act as a record of WWI. By having students recognize that their selected groups of ten photos were their own interpretations of the past rather than representing an objective past, Nemko hoped to help students recognize that the World War I monuments in Ypres were also interpretations of the past. He found that students drew heavily on photos of monuments built in the 1920s and 1930s in their selections, and even after discussions and teacher-prompting, still struggled to comprehend that the design of the monuments and the choice of what to memorialize, were the interpretations of World War I by politicians and architects and served specific purposes. Nemko speculated that the reason for this lack of critical thought was that

monuments had such an emotional impact on students that they thought more like “tourists” than analytical historians, seeing only one history that was being objectively represented in the monuments. Nemko was perplexed that students seemed to find the monuments “beyond the scope of critical analysis”. No student questioned why learning about World War I was important, and students overwhelmingly viewed monuments with reverence, as heritage, and as a “call to remember”, or even as a reminder to be patriotic. No student viewed the monuments as a historian would critically analyse historic records or documentation.

Nemko’s photograph selection exercise is an engaging way to introduce students to the concept of historical interpretation, but it fell short of its goal. Nemko suggests potential ways to enhance the efficacy of the exercise, including taking students to memorials built by different nations and contrasting their differences, and working to build their own monument of an event in collaboration with the design and technology departments of the school. These activities could be advantageous in helping students think about the motivations involved in choosing how to represent history. Both seem like less abstract ways to have students think about historic interpretation than Nemko’s photograph exercise, in which

students may be preoccupied choosing photos rather than thinking about which events historic architects chose to depict and how they chose to depict them. The photograph exercise does offer an engaging challenge to students of any age, but for students of this age the exercise should probably be accompanied by other supplemental activities. Used on its own, perhaps the photograph exercise would be better suited to older secondary school students who have more experience thinking about primary sources of history.

Designing and building a monument of their own would be an excellent way for students to develop an understanding of the choices involved in historic interpretation, but with modification, a similar task need not be as time-consuming and costly as the project Nemko suggests. Students could choose an event from history that they have researched or learned about in class and draw multiple versions of a monument memorializing that event from different points of view. Alternately, as a very quick exercise, students could be given photocopies of images of monuments and use a marker to draw on top of the images, changing them to represent different views of how the monument should memorialize its subject. Using artistic activities such as these encourages students to think like architects, forcing them to make decisions about what to memorialize and how to do it, making the link between their decisions and the historic decisions of monument-makers more visible.

There are small things that a teacher can do to help students critically analyse interpretations of the past. Nemko should have mentioned if he did these things, to let other teachers know if they seemed to be useful. Teachers can have discussions with students at the monument itself rather than afterwards in a classroom, so students can think about interpretation while using their senses to experience the monument. While visiting a monument, teachers can also tell students that even though they may be dealing with very sombre history, it is still good to critically question why they are visiting, who built the memorial, why, and what message or purpose the monument was intended to convey.

Nemko's efforts to help students learn to recognize monuments as historic interpretations and to consider the historical context in which monuments were built should be an inspiration to all teachers to make greater efforts to get students to think critically about all forms of historical evidence. Nemko's findings are a reminder that teachers need to make concerted attempts to get students to think like historians rather than uncritical tourists, and to try multimedia and participatory activities to guide students towards this goal. Most important in Nemko's article is his concluding thought: that students who understand historic interpretation will be able to more meaningfully engage in present-day debates about what should be memorialized and how it should be done.