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## BIOGRAPHY IN THE HISTORY CLASSROOM: CHALLENGES AND APPLICATIONS

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During the last decade, a change has come about in American history teaching that has shaken up classroom routines in secondary and higher education. Education experts and teachers increasingly question the predominant factual orientation in instructional practice and insist on the necessity of teaching students historical thinking skills. Instead of reading in the textbook and memorizing the “facts” of the national story, students are now expected to engage in contextualizing, corroborating and close reading of primary and secondary sources.<sup>1</sup> At first glance, biographies do not seem to contribute much to these goals. Haven’t teachers bored students for decades with the lengthy life stories of long-dead people from which a moral lesson was to be deduced?<sup>2</sup> This essay will argue that biographies are indeed a valuable resource for teaching historical thinking skills, and that they lend themselves well to varied and engaging activities in both secondary and post-secondary instruction.

If a historian works on a biography, he conducts a case study; if a certain biography is used in class to teach more complex ideas and structures, the underlying didactic principle is called exemplary learning. Education experts have reflected extensively on this principle for structuring history lessons.<sup>3</sup> However, few connections have been made between the unique properties of the biographical genre and the development of historical thinking skills, so that this essay must be seen as a tentative venture into a specific domain of educational

1 See “Historical Thinking Matters,” a project website of the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, and the Stanford University School of Education, which focuses on teaching students to critically read primary sources, <http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/ted/lessons/making/> (accessed Sep 29, 2014). For a brief sketch of the recent paradigm shift in

history teaching, see Joel Breakstone, Mark Smith and Sam Wineburg, “Beyond the Bubble: New History/Social Studies Assessments for the Common Core,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, Feb. 2013, 53–57. Up to now, Peter Lee, Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg have provided the most widely-read publications in North America on this matter; see for example Peter Lee, “Understanding

History,” in *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, ed. Peter Seixas (Toronto, 2004), 129–164; Peter Seixas and Tom Morton, *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts* (Toronto, 2013); Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, 2001).

2 During the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, history was »

»largely narrated in the historicist tradition, which assigned central importance to individual political leaders, explorers, inventors, etc.

3 Michele Barricelli, “Darstellungskonzepte von Geschichte im Unterricht,” in *Handbuch Praxis des Geschichtsunterrichts*, ed. Michele Barricelli and Martin Lücke, 2 vols. (Schwalbach/Ts., 2012), 2:202–223, here 215–217.

research.<sup>4</sup> The following discussion will focus on the didactic principle of exemplary learning, the history of biography in Germany and the U.S., and on how the analysis of biographies can contribute to improving students' understanding of history. Last but not least, the teaching value of the German Historical Institute's Immigrant Entrepreneurship project, an online collection of over one hundred business biographies, will be considered and a sample lesson will be discussed.<sup>5</sup>

## I. Case Studies and Exemplary Learning

Epistemologically speaking, the concept of case studies counts among the micro-historical methods of analysis. A specific historical case or "example" is investigated, which, compared to longitudinal approaches, implies a focus on a unique, locally and temporally bound event. If students are supposed to grasp more complex ideas and structures by the means of working on a specific, "exemplary" event or person, one speaks of exemplary learning. Introduced by the physicist and teacher Martin Wagenschein for science education and further developed by the pedagogical reformer Wolfgang Klafki, this approach has been discussed in German education and history didactics since the late 1950s.<sup>6</sup> Especially in history education, due to the notorious overcrowding of curricula, experts have tried to agree on which topics were to be taught by using cases or examples, and how this "didactic reduction" was to be accomplished.<sup>7</sup>

For a long time, experts on history teaching and learning in Germany discussed if and how the exemplary principle might be conducive to successful history learning. The consensus was reached that examples are useful for teaching historical thinking skills and fundamental categorical structures of the discipline; for orientation in history and the understanding of superordinate causalities, they generally are seen as less useful. This matches the general classification of the exemplary in didactics, which subdivides it into (a) elementary, (b) fundamental, (c) typical, (d) categorical and (e) representative. Exemplary learning becomes problematic, however, if students feel that historical content is random and replaceable by any other topic. Rohlfes even suggests that in students' perception, history might be replaced by a chain of disconnected events and people, forming a "meta-history."<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is indispensable to connect the study of exemplary events or persons with the "bigger picture." As has been explained, exemplary learning in history education has decided advantages but also pitfalls. With a view to these problems, the biographical genre

4 The most notable example is Klaus Bergmann, *Personalisierung im Geschichtsunterricht — Erziehung zur Demokratie?* (Stuttgart, 1972), who strongly criticized the narration of history through the perspective of only a few prominent persons; for contemporary works see Myra Zarnowski, *History Makers: A Questioning Approach to Reading and Writing Biographies* (Portsmouth, N.H., 2003); Shirley A. Leckie, "Why Biographies Matter in the Classroom," *OAH Magazine of History*, Jan. 2006, 7–10; Ken Wolf, "Teaching History the Old-Fashioned Way—Through Biography," *Perspectives on History*, May/June 1994, 20–23.

5 German Historical Institute, *Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present, 2010–2014*, www.immigrantentrepreneurship.org.

6 Cf. Martin Wagenschein, "Teaching to Understand: On the Concept of the Exemplary in Teaching," in *Teaching as a Reflective Practice: The German Didaktik Tradition*, ed. Ian Westbury et al. (Mahwah, N.J., 2000), 161–175; Wolfgang Klafki, *Das pädagogische Problem des Elementaren und die Theorie der kategorialen Bildung* (Weinheim, 1959).

7 Joachim Rohlfes, "Exemplarischer Geschichtsunterricht," in *Handbuch der Geschichtsdidaktik*, ed. Klaus Bergmann et al. (Seelze-Velber, 1997), 280–282.

8 *Ibid.*, 280–281.

and its value for teaching historical thinking skills shall be explored in the following section.

## II. Biography in American and German History Teaching

Biography as a genre has experienced varying degrees of appreciation.<sup>9</sup> The decline of historicism and the rise of structural history during the 1960s led to a devaluation of the genre in Germany, whereas in the U.S., it was never as discredited and continued to stand strong as a valid approach.<sup>10</sup> These trends and shifts in scholarship have of course influenced classroom practice, with different generations of teachers trained with different epistemological beliefs. Since the historicist approach to biography has been practiced widely and endured in the United States, biographies have seemingly been used in class with less reserve and greater confidence there than in Germany. The social history turn of the 1970s and later the cultural turn of the 1980s-1990s may simply have had less of an influence on teaching than they had in Europe.

Before the 1970s, biographies were usually strongly integrated into German history education. It was fairly common for teachers to give lectures on the lives of illustrious individuals.<sup>11</sup> Teacher narratives were supposed to be structured in a way that gripped the students' attention, made them immerse themselves in the story, and ideally brought them to empathize with and perhaps even admire the subject.<sup>12</sup> From the late 1960s onwards, instruction in schools became less personality-focused and also less teacher-centered. The lecture format was strongly criticized for being overpowering and for the fact that students were expected to passively and uncritically accept their instructor's interpretation of history.<sup>13</sup> In accordance with the paradigm shift in academia, educators focused more on social and economic issues as well as structural questions, and the "great men" moved to the background.<sup>14</sup> Changes in textbooks, which were particularly encouraged by Georg Eckert and the Institute for International Textbook Research, accompanied and reinforced this development.<sup>15</sup> Today, biographies have returned to history classrooms as the relevance of the individual is balanced against structural conditions and contextual influences. Women, minorities and marginalized groups have become

» *Geschichtsunterrichts*, ed. Barricelli and Lucke, 1:302-315, here 304-305; see also Hilke Günther-Armdt, "Historisches Wissen präsentieren: Vortragen," in *Geschichts-Methodik. Handbuch für die Sekundarstufe I und II*, ed. Hilke Günther-Armdt, 4th ed. (Berlin, 2012), 206-218; Joachim Rohlfes, "Geschichtserzählung," *GWU* 48 (1997): 736-743. An elaborate theoretical basis for the concept of historical narrativity is provided by Hans-Jürgen Pandel, *Historisches Erzählen: Narrativität im Geschichtsunterricht* (Schwalbach/Ts., 2010).

12 Cf. Depkat, "The Challenges of Biography."

13 Joachim Rohlfes, *Geschichte und ihre Didaktik* (Göttingen, 2005), 264-265.

14 Depkat, "The Challenges of Biography." Note that there was a similar but only tentative development immediately after World War II. Didactic materials were then published which stressed the history of the "little man" as opposed to that of the "great men" in more traditional textbooks. Hans Ebeling, *Methodik des Geschichtsunterrichts* (Hannover, 1953).

15 Cf. Jürgen Kocka, "Georg Eckert und die Anfänge der deutschen Sozialgeschichtsschreibung," in *Eckert: Das Bulletin* 12 (2012): 4-11, esp. 9; see also the website of the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research, <http://www.gei.de/nc/georg-eckert-institut.html>.

9 For a brief overview of biography in historiography see Volker Depkat, "The Challenges of Biography: European-American Reflections" (in this *Bulletin*); see also Wolfram Pyta,

"Biografisches Arbeiten als Methode: Geschichtswissenschaft," in *Handbuch Biografie: Methoden, Traditionen, Theorien*, ed. Christian Klein (Stuttgart, 2009), 331-338.

10 Depkat, "The Challenges of Biography."

11 Gerhard Schneider, "Personalisierung/ Personifizierung," in *Handbuch Praxis des »*

increasingly present as subjects of instruction, a development to which microhistory and cultural history have both contributed.

After browsing through teaching resources on American websites, one cannot help but notice that biographies are embraced enthusiastically by many educators throughout the United States. Teachers can find an abundance of tasks, lesson plans and practical tips for using biographies in the history classroom, pointing to general confidence in the genre's teaching value.<sup>16</sup> Secondary history teaching in the U.S. has always comprised elements of civic education, meaning that "key biographies" in the "national story" are discussed and passed along.<sup>17</sup> As Sam Wineburg, professor of education at Stanford University and a renowned expert on history education argues, "Myths inhabit the national consciousness the way gas molecules fill a vacuum. In a country as diverse as ours, we instinctively search for symbols — in children's biographies, coloring contests, Disney movies — that allow us to rally round common themes and common stories, whether true, embellished or made out of whole cloth."<sup>18</sup> In the United States, the knowledge of these "key biographies" (including figures such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr.) is much more a part of the cultural canon than in Germany.<sup>19</sup> The general public often consumes history in the shape of life stories, either at school or in public, and a strong focus on the individual in popular entertainment reinforces this tendency.<sup>20</sup>

However, looking more closely at the concrete learning materials on study websites, biographies most often are used in a merely illustrative fashion, contributing "facts" for students to absorb.<sup>21</sup> Generally, a task that does not require critical engagement has little value for fostering historical thinking skills. This usage may be attributed to the fact that in the United States, due to standardized state assessments, the acquisition of skills in historical analysis are often neglected in order to cover as much content as possible.<sup>22</sup> Teachers

16 For example Lorraine Woodard and Kathleen Benson Quinn: "Biography Project. Research and Class Presentation," *ReadWriteThink International Reading Association*, 2014, <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/biography-project-researchclass-243.html>; Melissa Kelly, "Teaching Through Biographies," *About.com Secondary Education*, 2014, <http://712educators.about.com/cs/lessonplans/a/biographies.htm>; Genia Connell, "Books for Teaching Biographies," *Scholastic: Teachers*, 2014, <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plan/books-teaching-biographies> (all accessed January 20, 2014).

17 Patrick Rael, "Teaching American History through Biography: Lessons from Maine Educators," *National History Education Clearinghouse*, March 2008, accessed January 17, 2014, <http://teachinghistory.org/tah-grants/lessons-learned/19088>.

18 Sam Wineburg, "Goodbye, Columbus: A New Survey Upends the Conventional Wisdom about Who Counts in American History," *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 2008, 98-104.

19 One could argue that for Germany the Third Reich period is an exception, with the lives of many Nazi officials, and particularly Adolf Hitler, inspiring curiosity among historians and the public alike.

20 A glance at the programming of the History Channel suggests how much popular history is narrated using the framework of biographies. For a comprehensive reader on celebrity culture and individualism in the U.S., see *Celebrity Culture in the United States*, ed. Terence J. Fitzgerald (New York, 2008).

21 See for example Christine L. Compston, "American National Biography Online. Teacher's Guide," 2010, accessed January 17, 2014, [http://www.anb.org/teacherguide/anb\\_guide.pdf](http://www.anb.org/teacherguide/anb_guide.pdf). On the notion of facts see Waldemar Grosch, "Fakten," in *Wörterbuch Geschichtsdidaktik*, ed. Ulrich Mayer et al., 2nd ed.

(Schwalbach/Ts., 2009), 59-60.

22 Wineburg, "Beyond the Bubble"; Katherine McCarthy Young and Gaea Leinhardt, "Writing from Primary Documents. A Way of Knowing in History," *Written Communication* 15 (1998): 25-68; Rael: "Teaching American History."

focus on imparting factual information as it is easier to test students on their acquisition of this knowledge using multiple-choice questions. If a biography is merely used as a vehicle to transport “facts,” then this is indeed an old-fashioned way of teaching, as Ken Wolf argues. Teachers are increasingly reluctant to make their lessons “parades of great men and women,” but still it often seems that students are not encouraged to systematically analyze biographies as constructed narratives.<sup>23</sup>

### III. The Benefits of Biography in the History Classroom

This lack of systematic analysis is unfortunate, since the educational value of biographies certainly is not limited to providing or illustrating historical content knowledge. Well-researched biographies are ideal material for implementing the acquisition of historical thinking skills, a focus in American history education that has recently been strongly emphasized by the incipient Common Core State Standards.<sup>24</sup>

First, reading biographies in the classroom can have very positive effects on learners’ abilities to deconstruct narratives and to reassemble facts into coherent stories.<sup>25</sup> On the one hand, critical and analytical engagement with the author’s narrative, with the conventions of a genre, or with primary sources, such as autobiographies, diaries or interviews, develops historic literacy.<sup>26</sup> It can be encouraged in all grades and on all ability levels. Considering that historic reading skills include being able to engage with many different source types, biographies can add to the diversity of genres used in the secondary and post-secondary classroom. They provide one more kind of textual information that can foster well-rounded analytical abilities. Reconstructive writing skills, on the other hand, may be promoted by having students compose their own biographies. The reconstruction of a historical narrative is very beneficial on many cognitive levels, as it requires a profound engagement with questions of continuity

»<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy>.

25 Historic reconstruction and deconstruction processes as core operations of historical thinking have been theorized by the FUER group, see Waltraud Schreiber, “Ein Kompetenz-Strukturmodell historischen Denkens,” *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 54 (2008): 198–212; see also Forschungsprojekt zur Förderung und Entwicklung von reflektiertem Geschichtsbewusstsein (FUER), accessed January 19, 2014, <http://www1.ku-eichstaett.de/GGF/Didaktik/Projekt/FUER.html>.

23 Wolf, “Teaching History,” 20. See, for example, Catherine Thome, “Bringing the Common Core Standards to Life in the Classroom,” *Learning A-Z*, 2012, accessed January 20, 2014, [\[to-life-in-the-classroom2.pdf\]\(http://www.learning-a-z.com/downloads/bringing-the-common-core-standards-to-life-in-the-classroom2.pdf\); also see Bernice Lerner, “Why Teach Biography?” \*Education Week\*, March 16, 2005, 37. Lerner adopts a completely uncritical standpoint, stating that students should read biographies in order to learn from the protagonists’ “nobility, courage,](http://www.learning-a-z.com/downloads/bringing-the-common-core-standards-</a></p>
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integrity, and compassion.”

24 National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers, *Common Core State Standards ELA*, Washington, D.C., 2010, accessed January 17, 2014, »

26 For the concept of historic literacy, see Sam Wineburg, Daisy Martin and Chauncey Monte-Sano, *Reading Like a Historian: Teaching Literacy in Middle and High School History Classrooms* (New York, 2013), x–xii.

and change as well as cause and consequence.<sup>27</sup> Students can gain insights into the creation of a plot and the handling of source material and narrative conventions. In high school, it would be most effective if the educator provided a selection of primary and secondary sources that learners could use as a basis for shorter writing assignments. Having learners take notes and categorize information by using graphic organizers are good pre-writing activities.<sup>28</sup> In college, whole independent research projects are thinkable, especially on historical actors who have not as yet come into the focus of scholarly research.<sup>29</sup>

The content of biographies can make history more accessible to students, a crucial condition for sustaining motivation. Nowadays, it is understood that personality-centered lessons and case studies must be combined with other structural frameworks, including chronological presentations, longitudinal approaches, and comparisons.<sup>30</sup> Still, biography enlivens and humanizes history, showing how political structures, intellectual movements and social/economic developments are the work of actual people, not of anonymous forces.<sup>31</sup> Students often struggle with this “bigger picture,” so that for many, the biographical perspective is very appealing.<sup>32</sup> The result can be higher motivation, deeper intellectual engagement and more positive attitudes towards the chosen topic.

Biography and autobiography are very much a part of each student’s personal experience. Reflecting on one’s own life and thinking about the lives of others, whether family and friends or politicians and celebrities, is a natural and frequent habit for many people, whether conscious or subconscious. Stories about us and others are an essential and constitutive part of humanity. There is a very close relationship between life, self, story and learning, so that it can be assumed that biography appeals to students on this very fundamental level.<sup>33</sup>

Having decided to implement the use of biography in history instruction, the instructor should then select suitable biographies that are conducive to fruitful learning. In practical terms, they should not be too long, too expensive or difficult to acquire, and ideally ability-appropriate. They should also have a high academic standard, with footnotes referencing sources and accounts of secondary literature. Biographies are situated between scholarship, literature and popular culture, but in classroom settings, teachers should lean towards selecting scholarly works in order to familiarize students with academic research and to teach them the value of thoroughly researched presentations.<sup>34</sup>

27 Mike Denos and Roland Case, *Teaching about Historical Thinking* (Vancouver, 2006), 27–44; “Using Biography in the History Classroom,” *Biographers International Organization*, accessed January 17, 2014, <http://www.bushlibrary.tamu.edu/>; Zarnowski, *History Makers*.

28 James Bellanca, A, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif., 2007).

29 Biographies of minority group members come to mind, but also of regional leaders. Klaus Bergmann calls this approach *Personifizierung*, i.e. focusing on the “anonymous” and speechless, instead of teaching only the lives of prominent and influential people, which he calls *Personalisierung*. See Klaus Bergmann, “Personalisierung, Personifizierung,” in *Handbuch der Geschichtsdidaktik*, ed. Bergmann et al., 298–300.

30 Michele Barricelli, “Thematische Strukturierungskonzepte,” in *Geschichtsmethodik*, ed. Günther Arndt, 46–62.

31 Michael P. Fronda, “Using Biography to Teach AP History,” *AP Central*, 2013, accessed January 17, 2014, [http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/members/courses/teachers\\_corner/29471.html](http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/members/courses/teachers_corner/29471.html).

32 Ibid.

33 Cf. Ivor Goodson et al., *Narrative Learning* (New York, 2010), 2; see also Jürgen Kocka, “Zurück zur Erzählung? Plädoyer für historische Argumentation,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 10.3 (1984): 395–408, 397–398.

34 Depkat, “The Challenges of Biography.”

In terms of content, the life of the chosen historical person should be interesting and compelling, but also representative of broader issues.<sup>35</sup> There have been reproaches that biographies offer “minutiae without meaning” or “lives without theory,” and teachers should make sure that students gain insights into general historical issues rather than studying a highly idiosyncratic experience.<sup>36</sup> In that sense, accounts of marginalized lives can be used to broaden the dominant Eurocentric perspective in historical research. Post-structuralist, post-colonial, feminist and queer theory have led to the emergence of a broader array of biographical subjects, which can prove valuable in fostering intercultural competence and broadening students’ horizons.<sup>37</sup> They are also an excellent resource for teaching multiperspectivity, as the increasing diversity of society can be shown through them.<sup>38</sup>

#### IV. Challenges and Pitfalls

Naturally, the genre of biography not only offers advantages but also poses difficulties to instructors and students. Some are inherent to the genre, while others are more practical. First and perhaps most important, students must be made aware that biographies are not factual accounts, but literary works with a narrative structure devised by the biographer. Authors construct causality and climaxes for the sake of plot, which is of course an interpretation of the sources, not an “objective” rendering of them.<sup>39</sup> Students may be prone to at first accept a biographer’s interpretation as fact without questioning the narrative conventions underlying it. This goes hand in hand with the observation that the general public and students often view history as facts waiting to be discovered in an archive, believing that once historians find and publish them the secrets of the past will be divulged.<sup>40</sup> Many people have little understanding that history is the result of interpretation and constant re-interpretation. Teaching students the differences between story, narrative, plot and source material is definitely a crucial, but not an easy task. Providing students with contextual information on the author, on academic debates of the time, and other background can help mitigate the power of these assumptions.<sup>41</sup>

Accordingly, students should be motivated to work directly with the biographer’s sources. Many biographical subjects incorporate elaborate personal myths into their life stories, and in some cases these are incorporated into a biography uncritically, regardless of their

35 Wolf, “Teaching History,” 21; Jane Hedeem, “Teaching with Biographies,” *Indiana Historical Society*, 2010, accessed January 21, 2014, <http://www.indianahistory.org/teachers-students/teacher-resources/classroom-tools/Why%20Teach%20with%20Biographies.pdf>; see also Bernd Schönemann, “Relevanz,” in *Wörterbuch Geschichtsdidaktik*, ed. Mayer et al., 166–168; Klaus Bergmann, *Der Gegenwartsbezug im Geschichtsunterricht* (Schwalbach/Ts., 2002).

36 Stanley Fish, “Just Published: Minutiae Without Meaning,” *New York Times*, Sep. 7, 1999, p. A19; David Ellis, *Literary Lives: Biography and the Search for Understanding* (New York, 2000), 1.

37 Hedeem, “Teaching with Biographies,” 1; Levke Harders, “Legitimizing Biography: Critical Approaches to Biographical Research” (in this *Bulletin*)

38 Leckie, “Why Biographies Matter”; see also Klaus Bergmann, *Multiperspektivität: Geschichte selber denken* (Schwalbach/Ts., 2000).

39 Bourdieu states that the notion of a life with a coherent thread and an innate meaning is a “biographical illusion.” See Pierre Bourdieu, “The Biographical Illusion,” in *Identity: A Reader*, ed. Paul Du Gay, Jessica Evans, and Peter Redman (London, 2004), 297–303.

40 Leckie, “Why Biographies Matter”; Waldemar Grosch, “Fakten,” in *Wörterbuch Geschichtsdidaktik*, ed. Mayer et al., 59–60.

41 Leckie, “Why Biographies Matter.”



accuracy.<sup>42</sup> It is important that students consider how selective human memory can be and that they take into account what autobiographical documents survive and the potential motives for leaving certain particular records behind.<sup>43</sup> It is also a good opportunity to remind students that this problem exists with all historical sources. Often, students have personal and inaccurate epistemological beliefs about the reliability of biographies, and this can be a useful opportunity to address these beliefs in this context.<sup>44</sup>

42 Ibid.

43 Cf. Goodson et al., *Narrative Learning*, 10–11. It is wise to concentrate on the central and most informative sources, as students may quickly be overwhelmed by a multitude of random documents.

44 Hilke Günther-Arndt, "Conceptual Change-Forschung: Eine Aufgabe für die Geschichtsdidaktik?," in *Geschichtsdidaktik empirisch: Untersuchungen zum historischen Denken und Lernen*, ed. Hilke Günther-Arndt (Berlin, 2006), 251–277.

45 Wolf, "Teaching History," 21.

46 Depkat, "The Challenges of Biography."

47 Klaus Bergmann, *Der Gegenwartsbezug im Geschichtsunterricht* (Schwalbach/Ts., 2002); Christian Heuer, "Gegenwartsbezug," in *Wörterbuch Geschichtsdidaktik*, ed. Mayer et al., 76–77; Thomas Nipperdey, "Über Relevanz," *GWU* 23 (1972): 577–596.

48 Hilke Günther-Arndt, "Historisches Lernen und Wissenserwerb," in *Geschichts-Didaktik. Praxishandbuch für die Sekundarstufe I und II*, ed. Hilke Günther-Arndt (Berlin, 2003), 32–35.

49 Scholastic has a wide selection of shorter biographies for grades 9 through 12, such as Albert Marrin, *Commander in Chief: Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War* (New York, 1997). Among other examples, the publisher Addison-Wesley issued various biographies of notable women under the imprint of the Radcliffe Biography Series.

Students are also generally quick to decide whether or not they "like" a subject of a biography, feelings which can influence the success of a teaching unit quite considerably.<sup>45</sup> Reflection on the standpoint of the reader and the impact of his or her personal preconceptions can be helpful in this situation. No biography can be objective, as the biographer always has a certain "relationship" to his subject.<sup>46</sup> This relationship in turn influences the attitude students develop towards the historical figure. If students reflect on their own feelings about the biography systematically, they can become aware of the fact that their attitude is generated and influenced by the biographer's perspective and his or her way of writing.

Then, as is the case in any history lesson, students need to understand the relevance of the particular person they are studying. Their impact in the past, their meaning for the students' present lives and their relevance for the future should be discussed, even if all these factors are not immediately obvious.<sup>47</sup> Knowledge of a task's relevance fosters intrinsic motivation in students, which is stronger, more effective and far more enduring than extrinsic motivation.<sup>48</sup> It is also indispensable to discuss the question of perspective. After all, the biographical subject might have had a very different self-conception and idea of their own personal relevance than researchers and the public have today.

Further challenges connected to the genre are of a more practical kind. Biographies often come as heavy tomes of several hundred pages, a fact that rules out many of them for high school use. In college, one might ask learners to engage with a lengthy biography for a whole term with the goal of completing an independent research project. In secondary instruction, teachers should instead resort to shorter texts (approximately one hundred pages) that students can read easily either during the summer break or after school, or to biographical articles that do not exceed thirty pages.<sup>49</sup> With younger students, it might be useful to structure the reading process by

establishing tasks to complete before, during, and after reading in order not to overwhelm them with the sheer amount of text.<sup>50</sup>

## V. Immigrant Entrepreneurship in the Classroom

As has been mentioned above, in the framework of a high school class or a college seminar, it is often convenient for educators and students to work with shorter biographical articles rather than with whole monographs. They can form the basis for units that are not too long and can easily be integrated into the curriculum. Also, for students the incentive is higher to complete the whole reading assignment. For these reasons, the biographical articles of the GHI's online Immigrant Entrepreneurship project, which tend to be within the range of 8,000 to 10,000 words, are an excellent and accessible resource for using biographies.<sup>51</sup>

First, educators can use the detailed biographies to ask more general questions about modern American history, business history, and migration. The Immigrant Entrepreneurship project offers a starting point for addressing a wealth of critical topics such as the immigrant experience, transnational history, globalization, and capitalism, all of which have shaped and defined the United States.<sup>52</sup> Each of the website's five volumes offers entries that can be aligned without difficulty to state-level content standards, and all biographies lend themselves to practice domain-specific reading and writing skills in accordance with the Common Core standards.

In connection with these goals, the website's business biographies provide ample opportunities to address aspects of entrepreneurship in relation to ethnicity, gender, or space. One can discover and analyze ethnic loyalties, ethnic enclaves and business strategies based on ethnicity. The biographies of female entrepreneurs illustrate the changing role of women in business as well as their strategies to succeed in a male-dominated sphere, and the spatial categorization of all entries makes it possible to explore and compare different regions of the United States. Additionally, students can increase their genre knowledge by exploring the concept of biography, by discussing its challenges and pitfalls, or even by writing their own business biographies.<sup>53</sup> They can sharpen their analytical skills by working with the primary sources provided, for example business records, photographs, advertisements, personal letters, audio files, or video clips. Due to this wealth of entries and materials, many modes of instruction are possible.

50 Stephanie Macceca, *Reading Strategies for Social Studies* (Huntington Beach, Calif., 2007).

51 Barricelli, "Darstellungskonzepte von Geschichte," in *Handbuch Praxis des Geschichtsunterrichts*, ed. Barricelli and Lücke.

52 Benjamin Schwantes, "Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present. An Online Project of the German Historical Institute Washington," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 33 (Summer 2014), 67-72.

53 Ibid.

## VI. An *Immigrant Entrepreneurship* Teaching Unit: Henrich Miller (1702-1782)

As has been shown, the project's business biographies lend themselves well to classroom practice. In the following, a sample teaching unit centering on the German publisher Henrich Miller (1702-1782) will be presented to exemplify how *Immigrant Entrepreneurship* project biographies can be integrated into the history classroom.<sup>54</sup> The teaching tool's level of challenge is suitable for advanced high school (AP) courses, both in U.S. and World History, and for lower-level college seminars. It is equally aligned to Common Core, NCHS and AP standards.<sup>55</sup>

The mini-unit of four lessons centers on Henrich Miller, a German-born printer and publisher in eighteenth-century Pennsylvania.<sup>56</sup> It addresses the value of a free press, the role of the media in the political and civic culture of an emerging nation, and the importance of group-specific media for immigrant settlements. The strong influence of religion and faith on business decisions as well as the complexities of immigration are other topics that can be raised by educators. The unit's deep structure moves along the lines of historical thinking. It starts with collecting context information, moves on to source analysis and ends in a genre evaluation exercise. A jigsaw exercise trains the students' understanding of chronology and also of cause and effect.

First, students assemble historical context information by studying Miller's biography in a jigsaw exercise.<sup>57</sup> This trains reading skills and, due to the nature of the jigsaw method, encourages reflection about chronological and causal patterns. In a second step, learners are asked to offer research ideas, which allow them to generate their own historical questions.<sup>58</sup> The core of the teaching unit is then the analysis of specified segments of the biographical article, during which students either focus on the topic of media or of religion. Here, secondary source analysis with a special focus on the biographical genre is trained. Analytical writing skills are fostered through the recommended assignments. Finally, in a group discussion, students evaluate biography as a genre with regard to its informational value

54 The complete teaching tool can be found online: Isabelle Schmitz, "Jigsaw Activity: Henrich Miller (1702-1782)," *Immigrant Entrepreneurship. German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present*, 2010-2014, accessed October 15, 2014, <http://www.immigrantentrepreneurship.org/teaching-tool.php?rec=3>.

55 Cf. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers, *Common Core State Standards*; National Center for History in Schools, "National Standards for History," 1996, <http://www.nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/>; The College Board, "United States History Course Description," last modified fall 2010, <http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/repository/ap-us-history-course-description.pdf>; The College Board, "World History Course Description," last modified fall 2010, <http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/repository/ap-world-history-course-description.pdf> (all accessed Jan 22, 2014).

56 For the biographical article on Miller, see Patrick Erben, "Henrich Miller," in *Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present*, vol. 1, ed. Marianne S. Wokeck. German Historical Institute, accessed January 15, 2014, <http://www.immigrantentrepreneurship.org/entry.php?rec=10>.

57 For an accessible and comprehensive account of the jigsaw method see Elliot Aronson and Shelley Patnoe. *Cooperation in the Classroom: The Jigsaw Method*, 3rd ed. (London, 2011).

58 Cf. Brigitte Dehne, "Schülerfragen als Leitfaden der Unterrichtsgestaltung," *Geschichte Erziehung Politik* 8 (1996): 108-116;

Waltraud Schreiber, "Kompetenzbereich historische Fragekompetenz," in *Kompetenzen historischen Denkens: Ein Strukturmodell als Beitrag*

*zur Kompetenzorientierung in der Geschichtsdidaktik*, ed. Andreas Körber, Waltraud Schreiber, and Alexander Schöner (Neuried, 2007), 155-193.

and are asked to pass critical judgment based on their engagement with the Miller text. During all four lessons, differentiating instruction is made possible by the fact that students work at their own pace, depend on each other to succeed, can bring in their individual strengths and help others with difficulties.<sup>59</sup>

After the mini-unit, students should either be able to outline the central role media played in immigrant settlements or be able to offer insights on the connection between a person's religion and their business decisions. Also, students are expected to explain the advantages and shortcomings of biographies as suitable sources for historical research. With a view to products, students should present two concise and well-written answers to the research questions.

### Conclusion

As has been mentioned, the call for content *and* skills training in history education has become increasingly dominant over the last years. Since recent academic trends in Germany and the United States have led to a re-appreciation of biographies among scholars, it seems natural to increase their use in the history classroom as well. Biographies can foster historical thinking, add to the rich diet of source materials that students can enjoy, and offer manifold opportunities for training in domain-specific literacy.<sup>60</sup> The Immigrant Entrepreneurship project's relatively short, well-researched and accessible business biographies can serve all these purposes. They enable teachers and students to delve into the lives of interesting businessmen and -women, and can contribute much to promote students' historical understanding in both secondary and post-secondary learning environments.

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59 The concept of differentiating instruction was developed in the 1970s, see Wolfgang Klafki and Hermann Stöcker, "Innere Differenzierung des Unterrichts," *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 22 (1976): 497-523; Ingvelde Scholz, "Es ist normal, verschieden zu sein: Unterricht in heterogenen Klassen," in *Der Spagat zwischen Fördern und Fordern. Unterrichten in heterogenen Klassen*, ed. Ingvelde Scholtz (Göttingen, 2008), 7-23; and Julia L. Roberts and Tracy F. Inman, *Strategies for Differentiating Instruction: Best Practices for the Classroom* (Waco, Tex., 2007).

60 Cf. Wineburg, Martin, and Monte-Sano, *Reading Like a Historian*, xii.

