

Communicating About History



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About the Presenter

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Today's Takeaways

Identify **challenges** in communicating about history to the public.

Discuss **recommendations** to help the public understand history work.

How to **apply** these recommendations to your own institutions.



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What We Will Cover

- Communicating About History – Key Ideas, Challenges & Opportunities
- Reframing History – Recommendations for overcoming challenges by leveraging identified opportunities
- Discussion & Hands-on Activities



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Welcome Activity



What is one common misconception about the practice of history that you wish you could challenge?

Write down ideas, discuss with a partner, share with the group.

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Communicating About History



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Background

- Partnership between American Association for State and Local History, FrameWorks Institute, the National Council on Public History, and the Organization of American Historians
- How does the public think about history?
- How can we use this knowledge to more effectively communicate about history and its value to society



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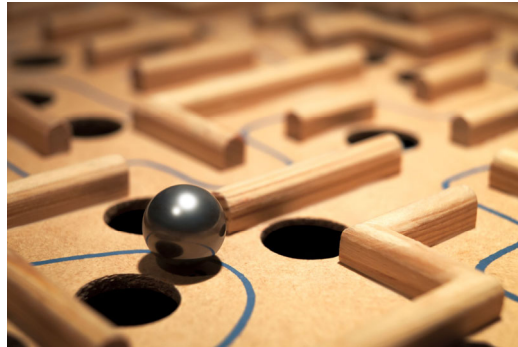
What Are We Trying to Communicate?

- What is history?
- Why is history important to society?
- Where do people learn about the past?
- What are the challenges to how our society engages with the past?
- What can do be done to support how our society engages with the past?



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CHALLENGES



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The public thinks of history (the past) as a series of chronological events driven by the actions of key individuals.

- George Washington – the founding of America
- Abraham Lincoln – abolishing slavery
- Susan B. Anthony – women's suffrage
- Martin Luther King – civil rights movement



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The public believes that history is about recording and documenting "just the facts."

- Think of historians as journalists (truth-seekers)
- Eyewitness accounts are the most reliable/believable sources of evidence.



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People can't tell the difference between rigorous analysis and personal opinion.

- Analyses and interpretations are biased
- Associated with journalism and "media bias"



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People think learning about the past means absorbing facts and figures.

- No need for critical thinking skills
- They do not see learning history as building skills.



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There is a belief among the public that mainstream historical narratives are the default that everyone has to learn, while narratives of historically oppressed and marginalized communities are extras that are unnecessary for everyone to learn.

- Mainstream mostly refers to white, male narratives
- Thoughts that only Black people want to learn about/know about slavery and that only women want to learn about, or are capable of knowing about the women's suffrage movement



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Many members of the public are reluctant to learn about or talk about painful or troubling things that happened in the past, particularly to historically oppressed groups.

- Atrocities are considered to be "in the past."
- Universal want for happy endings



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The public sees history as a non-essential hobby.

- Those who are engaged in history are naturally more intellectually curious.
- History as a leisure activity



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People are fatalistic about the possibility of how history is taught in the schools.

- Kids do not learn “enough” about history and this will not change
- Parents and individual students need to seek out their own learning opportunities if they want to know more about the past.



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Discussion



What are some of the ways these public perceptions have impacted your work?

Which of the above do you think is your biggest challenge/hurdle to overcome?

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Opportunities

- There is some understanding among the public that knowing history helps society learn from past mistakes.
- The public can sometimes see how a shared understanding of the past creates a sense of belonging to a community and to a society.
- People sometimes recognize that the more perspectives on the past are available, the better it will be understood.



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Opportunities (Continued)

- The public has some understanding of the power dynamics involved in discourses about the past.
- The public has a surface-level understanding of the importance of museums and historical sites.



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Recommendations



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Challenge #1

People can't tell the difference between rigorous analysis and personal opinion.



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Recommendation #1

Talk about critical thinking to shift perceptions about what history work involves.



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Talk about critical thinking

- Emphasize the role of critical thinking in historical practice
 - Evaluating different sources and perspectives
- Explain how learning history builds critical thinking skills
- Use the idea of critical thinking to anchor talk about the many stories that make up history
 - Critical evaluation of different stories and perspectives
 - Avoid the idea that these different stories are just personal opinions
 - Avoid talking about historical "truth"
 - Leads to thinking that historians are "biased"



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Activity



What are some critical thinking skills the work you do helps to develop?

Example: Identifying primary sources, analyzing sources, etc.

Write down ideas, discuss with a partner, share with the group.

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Challenge #2

The public believes that history is about recording and documenting “just the facts.”



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Recommendation #2

Compare historical interpretation to detective work to deepen understanding of historical practice.



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Compare historical interpretation to detective work

- Historical investigation includes a range of sources
 - written records, interviews, objects, etc.
- Historians use different tools and techniques to understand what happened in the past
 - collect preliminary evidence, analyze sources, compare and contrast differing accounts, formulate a thesis
- New evidence and perspectives lead to new and updated understandings
- We are not deleting/changing/taking away from historical narratives; we are adding to them, complicating them, and making them more complex for a fuller understanding of what was happening in the past, and how that continues to influence our present and future



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Discussion



What are some examples of new historical **UNDERSTANDINGS** that have changed the interpretation you present of your town?

What **SOURCES** contributed to this changing interpretation?

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Challenge #3

People are reluctant to learn or talk about painful things that happened in the past, particularly to historically oppressed groups.



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Recommendation #3

Emphasize how history helps us make progress toward justice to increase recognition of history's importance.



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History helps us progress towards a more just world

- History is essential for us to make progress as a state/country.
- Learning from the past – what worked and what did not work
 - Example: 1918 Influenza Pandemic versus COVID-19 Pandemic



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Discussion



How might you talk about the work your organization already does in a new way, to make the case that it's helping to bring about a more just society?

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Challenge #4

Belief that white, male historical narratives are the "default"; narratives of nonwhite people, historically oppressed peoples are "extras."



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Recommendation #4

Use concrete, location-specific, solutions-focused examples to build support for inclusive history.



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Use local examples to build support for inclusive history

- Use examples specific to your own town/community
- Make place-based connections to broader themes/events
- Can be combined with recommendation #3, examples of how Vermonters have worked towards a more just society
 - American Revolution
 - Marriage Equality
 - Title 16 - Education
 - Reproductive Rights Amendment



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Activity



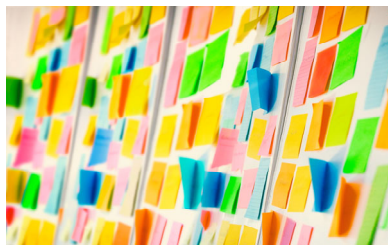
Craft one location-specific example from your town's history to illustrate one of the above recommendations.

Example: Recommendation: use local examples to build support for inclusive history (Stephen Bates – Vergennes, Dinah – Windsor, Alfred Chase – Morrisville, Charity & Sylvia – Weybridge)

If time allows, share with a partner.

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Activity



Write a short communications piece explaining your organization's value to your community.

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Organizational Benefits

- Talking about critical thinking helps people to better understand what historical interpretation means, builds appreciation for its importance to individuals and to society, and generates public support for devoting greater resources, including financial resources, to history organizations.
- The detective metaphor is highly effective in building a more accurate understanding of the process of historical interpretation. People already recognize that detective work includes multiple sources, consideration of conflicting accounts, and updating of views, so making the comparison allows them to come away with a more accurate understanding of what the work you do involves.



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Organizational Benefits (Continued)

- The value of progress confirms that we must learn from the past in order to move forward in the future –from both what we did right and what we did wrong. Connecting progress and justice helps orient the public towards a more inclusive version of history while also recognizing that history matters to all of us – not just history enthusiasts.
- Using specific, local, place-based examples helps people directly connect to historical events. It makes the study of history both personal and meaningful. As Vermont continues to diversify, need to incorporate people and stories that allow all people to see and place themselves in your town's overarching narrative.



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Recap

- Compare the work you do to uncover and tell stories to detective work
- Talk about critical thinking and how learning history helps to build critical thinking skills
- Emphasize how learning about and studying history helps us progress towards a more just society
- Use local examples to build support for inclusive history.



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Questions?



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