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TO THINK OF THE KNOWLEDGE IN HISTORY EDUCATION
TEACHING HISTORY THROUGH MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

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ΙΣΤΟΡΙΚΗ ΓΝΩΣΗ ΚΑΙ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΚΗ ΕΚΠΑΙΔΕΥΣΗ
ΔΙΔΑΣΚΟΝΤΑΣ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑ ΜΕΣΩ ΜΟΥΣΕΙΑΚΩΝ ΕΚΘΕΣΕΩΝ

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ABSTRACT

The pedagogical opportunities afforded by oral history in history education are not limited to the introduction of diverse experiences and perspectives over historical events. Introducing diverse historical experiences and perspectives to balance the understanding of history still assume, and often reaffirm, the master narratives as an overarching framework for knowledge of history. History's knowledge remains, therefore, shaped in reference to the master narrative and its framework even when oral history has successfully introduced the multiplicity of narratives and perspectives over events. This study argues that the pedagogical opportunity rests in making oral history itself the very subject for historical inquiry. Approaching oral history itself as a historical source that can be interpreted as evidence about the past, history education could set the stage for authentic research akin to that of historians. In order to demonstrate such application of oral history and oral testimonies, this study focuses on

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MuseumEdu 2 / November 2015, pp. 63-76.

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two museums exhibiting the same historical subject in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. Each museum adopts a distinct approach to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. This paper employs audience research to analyse the pedagogical impacts generated by each museum's exhibition. This comparative examination of the two museums demonstrates that the diversity of historical experiences represented by the exhibition of oral narratives in one of the two museums enables visitors to act as historians in order to understand the past and its meanings.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Τα εκπαιδευτικά πλεονεκτήματα που προσφέρει η προφορική ιστορία στην ιστορική εκπαίδευση δεν περιορίζονται μόνον στην εισαγωγή διαφορετικών εμπειριών και οπτικών ως προς τα ιστορικά γεγονότα. Η εισαγωγή διαφορετικών εμπειριών και οπτικών για την εξισορρόπηση της κατανόησης της ιστορίας μπορεί, συγχρόνως, να θεωρεί δεδομένα και, συχνά, να επιβεβαιώνει τα κύρια αφηγήματα ως κυρίαρχο πλαίσιο για τη γνώση της ιστορίας. Επομένως, η ιστορική γνώση εξακολουθεί να διαμορφώνεται σε σχέση με το κυρίαρχο αφήγημα και τη δομή του, ακόμα και όταν η προφορική ιστορία έχει εισαγάγει επιτυχώς την πολλαπλότητα των αφηγημάτων και οπτικών για τα γεγονότα. Η παρούσα μελέτη υποστηρίζει ότι το εκπαιδευτικό πλεονέκτημα έγκειται στο να εκλαμβάνουμε την ίδια την προφορική ιστορία ως ειδικό αντικείμενο προς ιστορική διερεύνηση. Προσεγγίζοντας την προφορική ιστορία ως μία κατασκευή που μας βοηθά να αντιληφθούμε το παρελθόν, η ιστορική εκπαίδευση μπορεί να ανοίγει τον δρόμο για αυθεντική έρευνα ανάλογη με αυτή των ιστορικών. Με στόχο να παρουσιαστούν αντίστοιχες εφαρμογές αξιοποίησης προφορική ιστορίας και προφορικών αφηγημάτων, το άρθρο επικεντρώνεται σε δύο μουσεία που παρουσιάζουν το ίδιο θέμα στο Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park (Πάρκο της Χιροσίμα Αφιερωμένο στην Ειρήνη). Καθένα από τα δύο μουσεία ακολουθεί διαφορετική μουσειολογική προσέγγιση του ατομικού βομβαρδισμού της Χιροσίμα. Το κείμενο βασίζεται σε έρευνα κοινού για να αναλύσει τα εκπαιδευτικά αποτελέσματα κάθε μουσειακής έκθεσης. Η συγκριτική εξέταση των δύο μουσείων αποκαλύπτει ότι η ποικιλία διαφορετικών ιστορικών εμπειριών που παρουσιάζονται μέσω της προφορικής ιστορίας ως μουσειακά αντικείμενα στις εκθέσεις του ενός μουσείου παρέχει στους επισκέπτες τη δυνατότητα να κατανοούν το παρελθόν και τα νοήματά τους ακολουθώντας τη μέθοδο εργασίας των ιστορικών.

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Introduction

This paper introduces the pedagogical possibility of oral history to bring changes to how knowledge is acquired in history education. It is not the aim of this paper to highlight the usefulness of oral history in introducing different or alternative voices to national history, or to position oral history as an agent for the democratisation of history. Such applications of oral history have long been practiced in the pedagogical scene of history education. However, the pedagogical potential of oral history should not be limited to serving supplementary narratives to the master narrative of national history. This paper argues for a pedagogical use of oral history that goes beyond it being a mere supplement to teaching *history*.

Failed pedagogy: Rote memorisation and historical controversy

History education is fraught with challenges. In Japan, history is often viewed as the subject for rote learning (SGJ 2011). Unlike mathematics and science education that display a clear continuity between what is done in pedagogical practice and in the scholarly work of each respective field, history education frequently relies upon rote learning, thus disconnecting it from the authentic scholarly practice of historians. In this way Knowledge appears to be shaped outside history, and the act of learning history is conflated with merely accumulating knowledge packaged as a predefined national/scholarly property.

More importantly, the rote learning practiced in history education ends up placing a greater value on textbooks as the source for authentic knowledge of history. History's knowledge became inflexible because the practitioners of history education have had little space to challenge the master narrative of the textbooks. The international disputes in East Asia over history textbooks' representation of the Second World War offer a pivotal example of scholars and practitioners caught in the controversy over the accuracy -particularly over the political accuracy- of textbook representations of history (Suh & Yurita 2010). In contrast, only a handful of studies frame these disputes constructively, as an inherent part of the process of comprehending the war by nations involved in different sides of the barricade (Seixas 2004).

Rote learning and the international disputes over history textbooks both carry the assumptions that history knowledge should have a clearly determinable value of truth and correctness, and should ultimately transcend individual interpretations, much like scientific knowledge. These assumptions, in fact, go against the important contribution of Leopold von Ranke to modern history. Thus Ranke's principles of archival research and source criticism are not often seen in the practice of teaching history (Iggers &

Powell 1990). Even where rote learning is not explicitly promoted, it is the pedagogical practice of history that contributes in making the learning of history a mere knowledge accumulation.

In this respect, history's pedagogical practice fosters the notion of *the history*, as opposed to *a history* (or *histories*). *The history* assumes the master narrative, which dictates the way we understand what happened in the past. Therefore, history's knowledge is to assimilate the master narrative; thus, it is prone to lead history education into rote learning. The term "*a history*" represents a narrative of history that is rational and logical when elaborating what happened in the past (Imano 2005). With this in mind, the notion of *a history* would actively acknowledge and always assume the plurality of historical realities as represented in oral history.

Plurality of history in oral history

The plurality of oral history, however, brings a dilemma to knowledge in history education. Oral accounts of history do not share a common framework of the master narrative; thus, there could be a multiplicity of meanings generated from what happened in the past. This paper examines the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and the National Memorial Hall for the Atomic Bomb Victims (henceforth Memorial Hall)¹ as sites for pedagogy in order to define knowledge in the plural reality of "history" (Longstreet & Shane 1993).



The *Atomic Dome* symbolising the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum (henceforth Peace Museum) had been the flagship museum to convey the message of peace by building a concerted voice against wars and nuclear weapons. However, the museum's pacifist principle began fading in the face of the controversy over the Smithsonian's planned exhibition of the Enola Gay² in 1999. The Enola Gay controversy confirmed that there are indisputably different and conflicting explanations of the bomb in spite of the Peace Museum's forty-year efforts to build a concerted voice against the nuclear weapons (Asada 1993; Bernstein 1995a, 1995b; Sodei 1995; Jo 1996).



The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum.

The disparity of historical understandings over the atomic bomb brought the Peace Museum a strong challenge, particularly over the museum's explanation of why Hiroshima became the target of the bomb. Ironically, by providing a historical explanation as to why Hiroshima was the forefront of the Japanese war aggression in East Asia, the museum could potentially be seen as rationalizing the nuclear attack. The museum's master narrative, therefore, faced a dilemma that the act of providing an explanation could rationalize the atrocities as unfortunate but necessary war consequences.

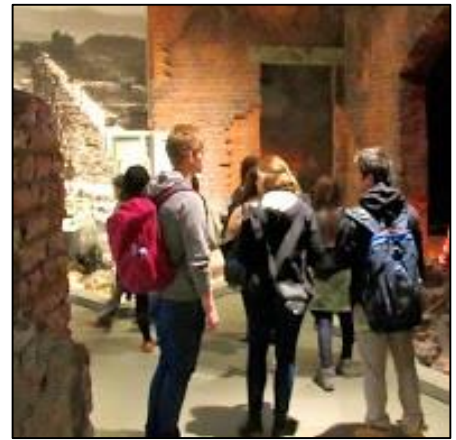


Representation of the location of the atomic explosion over the City of Hiroshima.

Elie Wiesel (1978), a Holocaust survivor, struggled with the same dilemma when testifying about his experience. Wiesel writes:

whoever has not lived through the event can never know it, and whoever has lived through the event can never fully reveal it (Wiesel 1978: 292).

Furthermore, Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005), in her analysis of the U.S. Holocaust Museum, asserts that “the power of the address of the pedagogy of the museum lies in its indeterminacy” (p. 100). In other words, traumatic events in history cannot be fully elaborated by those who have lived to experience it. Museums have difficulty in building their master narrative of such history without excluding the experiences that cannot be scripted. Indeterminacy is more a reluctant resolution than a pedagogical medium for museums to represent what cannot be represented.



Visitors in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum.

The Memorial Hall, however, employs indeterminacy as a tool to raise questions about the meanings produced and reproduced by the exiting master narratives about the bomb. Memorial Hall offers no explanation of its own, but does offer an interactive medium so that the audience can face the voluminous records of people's testimonies. This indeterminacy removes whatever framework the audience has relied on to rationalize Hiroshima's catastrophic event. In its place, the audience is made to face the diversity of people's lived experiences constituting of many oral histories.



The National Memorial Hall for the Atomic Bomb Victims (Memorial Hall).



Visitors in the Memorial Hall.

Most Memorial Hall visitors walked through the exhibitions of the Peace Museum beforehand. This unique setting between the two museums creates an interesting field for learning history. Visitors first learn about the historical event from the textbook-style master narrative of the Peace Museum. Then, there is learning from oral history at the Memorial Hall, which carries no master narrative so as to enable diverse narratives over what happened in the past.

Impact of oral history in a museum setting: Audience research

In order to explore the pedagogical potential of each museum, the visitor notebooks were examined with an emphasis on comments from the Peace Museum and the Memorial Hall written in February and March 2006. This period was selected to minimize the effect that media and sociopolitical atmosphere around anniversary dates of war events such as August 6th (the day the bomb was dropped to Hiroshima) are likely to have on the audience. This study employed content analysis to categorize visitor notebook entries from each museum. Two researchers worked independently in categorizing the notebook entries, and chi-square test was employed to test inter-rater reliability between the two researchers.

Analysis of visitors' comments show that visitors to both museums commonly emphasize the desire for world peace, as well as a strong opposition to wars in general. This reaction is anticipated in peace museums, particularly in those exhibiting a war atrocity unique in human history. However, there are significant differences between the two museums in the way visitors display a sense of responsibility as historic and social agents. Specifically, visitors to the Memorial Hall articulate far more frequently and explicitly in their comments the need for taking personal responsibility for the past war.



Visitors in the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum (left) and in the Memorial Hall (right).

Furthermore, there was a striking difference between the two museums in the nature and frequency of comments regarding the establishment of future peace in the world. The Memorial Hall has 3.8% more entries in visitor notebooks, stating that the responsibility for building world peace resides with each individual human, as a personal commitment. It is therefore safe to say that the Memorial Hall makes more impact on fostering people's agency toward building peace. In contrast, the Peace Museum visitors tended to write their comments more as a general prayer for peace envisioning world political structures rather than themselves as agent for enabling world peace. In fact, 5.1% of the Peace Museum's visitor comments stated the responsibility for building world peace resides on their political leaders, and this was 17 times more than those in Memorial Hall's visitor notebooks. This is to reinstate the previous point that the Memorial Hall employs pedagogy for shaping individual agency for peace building, and it is this pedagogy that is missing or insufficient in the Peace Museum.

Discussion

The audience research discussed above suggests that both museums were successful in conveying their central message of peace. However, there was a significant difference in the manner in which the audiences responded to it: It appears that the Memorial Hall, by presenting diverse oral narratives of people's experience of the atomic bombing, was more successful in transforming visitors into critical subjects able to think about peace beyond the given framework of the atomic bombing. In this respect, the Memorial Hall offers an application of what Giroux calls *border pedagogy* (Giroux 1983, 1988, 1992), that is, a strategy to provide diverse lenses in order to turn learners into critical subjects acting for social change.

Border pedagogy aims to make learners move beyond the state of bordered consciousness, that is, consciousness limited by difference and power (Aronowitz & Giroux 1991). The Memorial Hall exposes visitors to the turbulence of diverse and complex memories represented in oral histories of the witnesses and victims. No particular frame is imposed here as a master narrative for interpretation of these personal stories. This results in infinite possibilities to draw meaning from the artifacts. Confronted with such an open space for drawing meaning from it all, the audience was forced to seek some rationality that could hold together realities so diverse and so complex as those represented in oral histories. Thus, through its pedagogical application of oral history, the Memorial Hall offers a setting where the audience can simulate what historians do in their training and in their practice. The product of such pedagogy is an awareness of individual agency and a desire to commit personally toward the construction of the future. Furthermore, the pursuit for a better future comes from building a meaningful connection between past events and present conditions. The role

of the Peace Museum in forming and/or preparing people for a base understanding of history should also be inquired. Yet, it is the application of oral history at the Memorial Hall that suggests a pedagogy that builds the kind of knowledge of history required in order to pursue *tolerance* in the sense proposed by Michael Walzer (1997) in a global society.

Today's globalising sociopolitical environment requires people to seek a peaceful coexistence with others who carry diverse and often conflicting master narratives of historical realities. In such an environment, history education needs to seek the knowledge that pushes people to go beyond a master narrative framework. As the example of the National Memorial Hall for the Atomic Bomb Victims demonstrates, the pedagogical agency of oral history should not be limited to authenticating an event through multiple accounts. A much-needed role in history education is to foster the skills necessary to seek understanding in a wide spectrum of meanings possible beyond master narrative frameworks.

Oral history, therefore, is an enriching addition to the current practice of history education. It adds a meaningful pedagogical opportunity in helping learners move beyond the feeling that knowledge and meanings of history are constructed outside the reach of their history education. The pedagogical value of oral history lies in opening the door for learners to exploring meanings in history as historians do.

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Endnotes

¹ Established in August 1955, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum conveys the message for peace and the abolition of nuclear armaments through documenting the records of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Hiroshima Peace Memorial Hall for the Atomic Bomb Victims documents people's testimonies about Hiroshima's atomic bombing. It was opened in 2002 as the first national museum commemorating the atomic bomb victims. Both museums are located within the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, Hiroshima, Japan.

² The Enola Gay was the aircraft that threw the atomic bomb to Hiroshima. [Editors' note.]

