

Introduction – From History to Teaching Nature of Science

*Introdução – Da
História ao Ensino da
Natureza da Ciência*

Douglas Allchin
University of Minnesota

Historians know very well that their studies yield valuable insights into the nature of science, or how science works in practice. "History, if viewed as a repository for more than anecdote or chronology," Thomas Kuhn famously declared, "could produce a decisive transformation in the image of science" (1970, p. 1). The challenge today is how to convey those insights to students in Science classes (ALLCHIN, 2014). This special volume describes a method based on historical inquiry cases, and presents three field-tested examples, each based on science in Brazil.

Conventional historical narratives are, of course, one strategy for conveying the lessons of History. As early as the 1950s, Harvard University professor and political titan James Bryant Conant and his colleague Leonard Nash articulated the goal and assembled a handful of case studies specifically for college Science students (CONANT, 1947; CONANT and NASH, 1957; NASH, 1951). Leo Klopfer then did the same for high school students, with measured success (KLOPFER, 1964-66; KLOPFER and COOLEY, 1963). Such stories were accompanied by commentary and study questions to highlight the nature of science elements.

Educators today, however, do not regard simple texts or didactic lectures as the most effective form of learning. Rather, they aim to engage students in their own learning. Educators focus on what students already know – or think they understand – and pose questions, problems and anomalies to solve. Their subsequent

investigative activity and reflection help them develop more sophisticated levels of understanding. Just as historians are aware that scientists "construct" knowledge rather than "discover" it passively, educators realize that students "construct" and transform their own knowledge through complex cognitive processes. The contemporary aim, then, is to frame episodes of inquiry. Inquiry is the method whereby students build their own knowledge stepwise through solving intellectual challenges in a collaborative setting. For the instructor, the primary focus shifts from preformed, predigested answers to open questions that carefully guide inquiry and reflection.

Accordingly, several Science education projects combine historical narratives with embedded questions (ALLCHIN, 2012; CLOUGH, 2011; HAGEN, ALLCHIN, and SINGER, 1996). The aim is to highlight certain aspects of scientific practice and prompt students to consider and characterize their role in the case. For example, students might be asked how to compare measurements of atmospheric carbon dioxide from two different instruments hundreds of kilometers apart – ultimately a lesson in standardization and calibration (LEAF, 2011). They might be asked to consider how well the available evidence supports a method for preventing smallpox and whether it can be considered "proven" – a lesson on underdetermination, potential error, credibility, and the nature and limitations of evidence (REMILLARD-HAGEN, 2010). Or students might be invited to consider how they will fund an expedition to study Natural History and collect specimens in an exotic rainforest far away – a lesson in patronage and the need for resources and funding to conduct scientific research (FRIEDMAN, 2010).

Questions about cases from the past could easily drift into what historians might recognize as standard historical analysis. One examines just how the science unfolded, in retrospect, from a secure perspective of having reached a final conclusion. However, a major goal of Science education (or scientific literacy) is to inform an assessment of claims from contemporary science. In many cases relevant to consumers and citizens today, science is incomplete or claims are actively disputed. Students must develop epistemic skills to evaluate the reliability or trustworthiness of alternative claims, even when science

is not considered complete. That skill is ultimately based on historical understanding of how knowledge is created gradually, and how growing confidence in scientific conclusions is secured. The ideal inquiry approach for educators borrows again a concept familiar to professional historians: a historicist perspective, or a view of what Bruno Latour (1987) called "science-in-the-making" (in contrast to "ready-made science"). Accordingly, historical perspectives that render cultural and technological context and uncertainty at a given point in history are indispensable tools for educators in teaching the Nature of Science through inquiry. The effect is not unlike some immersive participatory activities used to teach History itself: open-ended historical role-play simulations, such as the reacting to the past curriculum (Barnard College, 2018; DRISCOLL, DUNN, SIEMS & SWANSON, 2014; POWERS, BURNEY, and CARNES, 2010).

The result is that historical inquiry cases in Science education ideally situate the student in the historical context and present them with the problems just as they were addressed by the historical scientists. For example, students learn about problems of development, heredity and evolution in 1910, then assume the role of Thomas Hunt Morgan, who encountered an anomalous white-eyed fruit fly mutant: what did it mean? What experiments should one do next? Later, how should one interpret the unexpected results, which fit no known pattern? (ALLCHIN, 1996). Or: as Archibald Garrod in 1909, how should one proceed when others fail to take notice of your claims about several striking cases of inborn errors in metabolism (such as albinism and alkaptonuria, conditions that would later be recognized as vivid evidence for the one gene-one enzyme concept) (ALLCHIN & GABEL, 2017; ALLCHIN, 2017)? Or: as a fellow scientist in the 1960s, how would you evaluate Lynn Margulis' claims about the endosymbiotic origin of cells, given that the evidence is mixed (HAGEN, 1996)? From reflecting on these inquiries and their historical outcomes, students learn about experimental design, critical experiments, revision of theories, cognitive barriers to conceptual change, scientific debates and their resolution, and more. These are the basis of the analytic skills that students will use to assess contemporary scientific claims, such as about

links between climate change, deforestation and drought; or about the efficacy of garrafada as traditional remedies or of phosphoethanolamine as a treatment for cancer; or whether Brazilian policies support sustainable fisheries; or whether a nuclear power plant is sufficiently safe.

This special volume of *Cadernos de História da Ciência* addresses the use of historical inquiry cases to teach Nature of Science. The first paper describes the method in general. It addresses, in particular, the tension between open-ended inquiry, which is preferred for learning, and the closed nature of history, which has already occurred. If the historical lessons are to be informative, how can students be given the freedom to pursue the problems, essentially creating their own history?

The next three contributions are about particular case studies. All are based on science in Brazil. The first presents Vital Brazil and his work on snake venom, and how he reached the unexpected conclusion that anti-sera were specific to snake type rather than following a common scale of venom toxicity. The second concerns the ground-breaking work of Carlos Chagas on the cause and transmission of a disease that afflicted railroad workers, and that now bears his name. The third case concerns the work of world-renowned evolutionary biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky, who studied the genetics of fruit fly populations in Brazil, and helped to establish the Genetics Department at the University of São Paulo.

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