

WENSLEY M. REYES

History Teaching, Thinking Development, and Transforming Society

ABSTRACT: History teaching is defined as the transmission of historical knowledge to people who do not yet have such knowledge. As a discipline, history concerns itself with a scientific study of the past. In the age of globalization, there is a need to reassess the way schools perceive and approach the subject and teaching of history, especially when it has become part of what we call “service courses” – subjects in our schools that exist in order to satisfy the requisites of the implementing educational agency. Historical knowledge, with the current trends in education, has been contested. Also teaching history within the classroom has been challenged due to the question of practicality of historical knowledge. Some cynics argued that historical knowledge will not provide much help, especially in solving pressing issues and problems. This assumption about history’s impractical knowledge resulted to the relegation of the study of the past to the margins. Likewise, teaching history has not merited the prestige of the so-called “usable subjects”. Thus, rethinking history’s practicality and the usability of such knowledge should be incorporated with the teaching of the subject.

KEY WORD: History, history teaching, development, school, society, service courses, usable subjects, and rethinking history.

IKHTISAR: “Pengajaran Sejarah, Perkembangan Berpikir, dan Transformasi Masyarakat”. Pengajaran sejarah didefinisikan sebagai transmisi pengetahuan sejarah kepada masyarakat dari yang belum tahu menjadi tahu. Sebagai sebuah disiplin ilmu, sejarah hirau dengan masalah kajian ilmiah pada masa lalu. Di era globalisasi, ada kebutuhan untuk menilai kembali cara sekolah memahami dan mendekati subjek dan pengajaran sejarah, terutama ketika telah menjadi bagian dari apa yang kita sebut “program layanan” – dimana mata pelajaran yang ada di sekolah kita untuk memenuhi syarat dari lembaga pelaksana pendidikan. Pengetahuan sejarah, dengan kecenderungan saat ini dalam pendidikan, telah dipertaruhkan. Juga mengajar sejarah didalam kelas telah ditantang karena masalah kepraktisan pengetahuan sejarah. Beberapa yang sinis berpendapat bahwa pengetahuan sejarah tidak akan memberikan banyak bantuan, terutama dalam memecahkan berbagai masalah dan isu yang mendesak. Asumsi tentang pengetahuan sejarah yang kurang praktis ini mengakibatkan degradasi studi masa lalu yang terpinggirkan. Karenanya, mengajar sejarah belum memiliki kelayakan prestise yang disebut “mata pelajaran siap-pakai”. Jadi, memikirkan kembali pengetahuan sejarah yang praktis dan berguna harus dimasukkan dalam pengajaran sejarah.

KATA KUNCI: Sejarah, pengajaran sejarah, pembangunan, sekolah, masyarakat, program layanan, pelajaran yang berguna, dan memikirkan kembali sejarah.

INTRODUCTION

Our schools study and teach history for we recognize the value of the past as part of our existence. We deal with

the past when we discuss history. The past, according to R.G. Collingwood, “consists of particular events in space and time which are no longer happening,

About the Author: Assist. Prof. Wensley M. Reyes is currently a faculty member of the Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences PNU (Philippine Normal University) in Manila, the Philippines. He has earned from the University of the Philippines – Diliman his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in the discipline of History in 2002 and 2010 respectively. His e-mail address is: reyes.wm@pnu.edu.ph

How to cite this article? Reyes, Wensley M. (2014). “History Teaching, Thinking Development, and Transforming Society” in *SUSURGALUR: Jurnal Kajian Sejarah & Pendidikan Sejarah*, Vol.2(2), September, pp.171-178. Bandung, Indonesia: Minda Masagi Press and UBD Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam, ISSN 2302-5808. Available online also at: <http://susurgalur-jksps.com/history-teaching-thinking-development/>

Chronicle of the article: Accepted (August 14, 2014); Revised (September 2, 2014); and Published (September 24, 2014).

cannot be apprehended by mathematical thinking" (Collingwood, 2014). Thus, the past is equated with history. It is a foreign land, but knowledge of which is of prime importance to our being and becoming – individually and collectively. Likewise, the past is associated with old people, places, and events. The past is not development.

While the *present* is characterized with anytime – this is existing or occurring at the current moment. It is that moment which is not yet history and the only time when events are happening in actuality. The present time is the *only* time, when history could be discussed.

The *future* is a condition of possibilities. It is something that will exist or will happen in the time to come. Because the future is yet to come, some treat it with apprehension – a time of uncertainty, while others see the future in a positive light – that is often associated with development. The past is link to the future only with the existence of the present time. The present is projected to the future. The present, the current state, is the locus of action. While the future is free for all to take. Generally, most people will not link history with development.

HISTORY TEACHING AND HISTORY

The world is changing and the 21st century poses challenges in various fields. We live in an era where boundaries are broken and new trends are made. It is imperative to provide suitable ways to cushion the impact of drastic change. We must employ strategies that would best lead the way for a smooth transition. But, before we could provide alternatives and solutions, our communities must identify them to be able to address these challenges properly. Our educational system is also in the verge of changing priorities, one concern that I wish to discuss and what might be pressing would be the relevance of history and history teaching.

In the age of globalization, there is a need to reassess the way schools perceive and approach the subject and teaching of history, especially when it has become part of what we call “service courses” – subjects in our schools which exist in order to satisfy the requisites of the implementing educational agency.

The American sociologist, C. Wright Mills (1959), regarded teaching as a totally different endeavor from other fields. He also implied that teaching is a powerful tool. When a teacher performs his duty, he has additional responsibilities than sharing knowledge. He is not just sharing information, he also intelligibly thinks a loud in front of his “captive audience” which makes him:

[...] to make very explicit the assumptions, the facts, the methods, the judgements [...] and at all times repeatedly make clear the full range of moral alternatives before he gives his own choice (Mills, 1959:79).

C. Wright Mills stated also that the teacher’s “*foremost job is to reveal to them [the students] as fully as he can just how a supposedly self-disciplined mind works*” (Mills, 1959:79). Thus, teaching provides the necessary foundation as a springboard for further student’s mental explorations.

History teaching is defined as the “*transmission of historical knowledge to people who do not yet have such knowledge*” (AHA, 2011). It occurs in various places and opportunities – in the classrooms, museums, and historic sites; and in different forms (print, media, websites, and documentaries). Likewise, history is a very important component of our educational system; and teaching itself is fundamental to the practice of history. According to the AHA (American Historical Association), to teach history is to “*perform the essential work of assuring that the past remains a part of living memory in the present*” (AHA, 2011).

“History”, as the discipline of our concern, deals with a scientific study

of the past. In our practical world and with the current trends in education, the product of historical research which is historical knowledge has been contested. Some cynics argued that historical knowledge will not provide much help, especially in solving pressing issues and problems.

What do we expect to reap if we teach history? This assumption about history's impractical knowledge resulted to the relegation of the study of the past to the margins. Likewise, teaching history has not merited the prestige of the so-called "usable subjects". Teaching history (within and without the classroom) has been challenged due to the question of practicality of historical knowledge. Thus, rethinking history's practicality, processes, and the usability of such knowledge it generates while rectifying our paradigm should be addressed.

Developing real life-skills has defined the inclusion of subjects in our educational system. One current trend in global education pushes for understanding diversity. Global education focuses in the interdependence of human beings and their common fate regardless of the national boundaries within which we live (Banks & McGee Banks eds., 2010:446). This unfounded understanding is dangerous for it blurs the past. The tendency is to forget and move on. But for understanding to be meaningful, one should be historical-rooted as to fully comprehend what man has done.

Likewise, the essence of historical knowledge has been challenged, especially in the field of progress and development. History teaching supposes a shift from a knowledge-based curriculum to a more pragmatic use of history. The move is from the former style of feeding information – memorization of facts i.e. dates, places, and people, to a more out-comes based, practical outputs of historical knowledge.

But, memorization is not history. History serves as a guide of what man has achieved. All that we have discovered in the pursuit of historical knowledge are just fragments of a larger purpose in history. Theoretically, Renato Constantino & L.R. Constantino, the Filipino historians, posit that:

History, then, should serve the purpose of integrating seemingly isolated facts and events into a coherent historical process, so that a view of the totality of social reality may be achieved. Only then can facts be really understood and not merely known; only then can this understanding of facts become an understanding of society; only then can history be perceived as a unified process. Only then can history have a goal [...]. And when history has a goal, the past ceases to dominate the present and to hold back the future. Then, history can be consciously made (Constantino & Constantino, 1993:404).

But, then again, understanding should lead to something and the question still remains "how knowledge of the past could be utilized aside from the idea of just knowing it"? The answer lies with the skills developed from generating that knowledge and what to do with the knowledge.

HISTORICAL THINKING SKILLS

"The essence of knowledge is having it; applying it". This Confucian precept encapsulates the real value of knowledge which is application. Use determines existence. In the field of teaching history, developing historical skills are potent tools to understand our society. Although, the subject of history has problems of its own, like "difficulties of explanation, interpretation, and evaluation are immerse. Yet historians persist in their toil, seeking to render some small portions of human experience intelligible" (Gilderhaus, 1996:10-11). Nonetheless, history as human self-knowledge will also be useful.

Skills developed in the field of history were defined by the National

Center for History in the Schools and the University of California. Historical thinking skills include the following: Chronological thinking, Historical comprehension, Historical analysis and interpretation, Historical research capabilities, and Historical issues-analysis and decision-making.¹

These skills, one would argue, are purely beneficial to the individual and would also of advantage to the society if consciously utilized. Collectively, these skills offer a perfect opportunity, a way of thinking that if passed on and harnessed properly could help in achieving development.

On the History Teaching and “Thinking” about Development. The task of linking history teaching and thinking about development seems like off the mark, but the connection would always be the application of the knowledge and skills generated from the discipline. This part of the paper is not intended to argue for or against development. Development thinking is a complex field of study.

Jan Nederveen Pieterse discussed in his book, *Development Theory: Deconstructions/Reconstructions* (2010), the different trends, developments, dilemmas, paradigms of development theory, and the futures of development. Understanding the very nature of development would be acquainted with a discussion about the “hardware of development” such as infrastructure, capital inputs and technology, and the “software of development” includes institutions, processes and management, education, and knowledge (Pieterse, 2010:189).

Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2010) provided also the different major development perspectives: modernization theory, dependency theory, neo-classical economics, alternative development, human

development, and post development. As much as I want to thoroughly discuss these perspectives, my concern is not *development thinking* per se, but rather “thinking” development in relation with teaching of history.

Renato Constantino & L.R. Constantino, the Filipino social critiques, once proposed what they called “a usable past”, providing a clear goal to the use of historical knowledge. “*And when history has a goal, the past ceases to dominate the present and to hold back the future. Then history can be consciously made*” (Constantino & Constantino, 1993:404). Unfortunately, historical knowledge and skills are treated as detached knowledge. The way we think about history which is memorizing something of the past, limits our understanding of the discipline. Renato Constantino & L.R. Constantino further explained as follows:

Only when the present is seen as a continuation of a historical process, as part of history in flux, can the future be consciously shaped [...]. The past should not be the object of mere contemplation if the present is to be meaningful. For if the past were viewed as a “frozen reality”, it would either dominate and immobilize the present or be discarded as irrelevant to today’s concerns (Constantino & Constantino, 1993:392).

Likewise, development thinking is always equated with problem-solving – trying to figure out the best possible solutions to current day challenges. “Thinking” as a mental process involves producing thoughts. This involves the act or the process itself. To think is to produce ideas and thoughts. Learning historical knowledge and skills could only be useful if one is able to recognize its practicality and is able to produce thoughts; thus, one really “thinks history” and not just memorizing it.

Perspectives in thinking would alter the way we see knowledge. Ellen Langer in her book, *The Power of Mindful Learning* (1997), mentions

¹See, for example, www.nchs.ucla.edu/history-standards/historical-thinking-standards/overview [accessed in Manila, the Philippines: August 13, 2014].

the differences between intelligence and mindfulness. Intelligence's operationalizes problem-solving and an approach may attempt to view problem from several perspectives, the objective is to identify the perspective the most nearly responds to reality. While "*(f)rom a mindful perspective, one's response to a particular situation is not an attempt to make the best choice from among available options, but to create options*" (Langer, 1997:113-114).

Thus, mindful teaching and learning of history may provide us not only with existing choices, but with original possibilities. Development planners should be historically rooted taking into consideration the vast experience of human communities. Knowledge about the past could provide new perspectives to envision the future.

On the History in Thinking Development. In an article entitled "How and Why Does History Matter for Development Policy?", M. Szreter Woolcock & V.S. Rao (2010) identified that the craft of historical scholarship could contribute for development policy purposes. M. Szreter Woolcock & V.S. Rao, then, stated as follows:

Historical scholarship is primarily about locating, drawing upon, and integrating different types and sources of material – much of it fragmentary (in quality and scope), textual, and scattered across different domains – in order to discern coherently the specific processes and mechanisms by which one historical moment influences another [...]. **For development policy purposes, historiography – or, by implication, the recognition that there is more than one way to make and substantiate a causal empirical claim, especially as it pertains to time** (Woolcock & Rao, 2010:11-12, emphasis mine).

Historical scholarship, which includes historiography, context, and processes, would be useful in thinking about development. The method and the result of that scholarship could provide a deeper understanding of our actions for

the future. Scholars posit that history's "*insistence on the methodological principles of respect for context, process and difference when addressing the study societies and policy efforts to bring about change in them*" (Woolcock & Rao, 2010:15).

They have also identified three broad categories in which history matters for development policy: (1) History views change as a **complex causal process** requiring a diversity of forms and knowledge, and a corresponding variety of methods for acquiring and interpreting that knowledge; (2) History is a resource of **critical and reflective self-awareness** about the nature of the discipline of development itself; and (3) History brings a **particular kind of perspective** to development problems (Woolcock & Rao, 2010, emphasis mine).

Aside from these three ways, they have identified eight more specific ways in which the engagement with history matters for contemporary development policy (Woolcock & Rao, 2010). I have liberally interpreted it as follows: (1) Understanding hybridity, (2) Process analysis, (3) Center-periphery relationship, (4) Non-linearity and conflictual nature of development, (5) Context, (6) Time-scale for development, (7) Reflective nature, and (8) the Past as reference.

These engagements with history provide concrete manifestation how historical knowledge and skills could be integrated in thinking about development of history matters in development policy. Yet, within our educational system, incorporating history into thinking about development might take some time before it becomes a habit. Molding our educator's mindset into the proper use of history is essential.

With history as a guiding element, critical questions might be provoked and the reflective nature of the discipline is taken into consideration, especially when "*(t)he origins of development*

thinking lie in the criticism of progress" (Cowen & Sheton, 1996). Development and improvement should not be treated as equal rather the question of "whose development?" should also be critically asked:

It remains attractive to understand development as improvement, but which improvement and how? Understanding development as improvement almost inevitably invites a one-dimensional perspective, privileging one or other dimension, and a managerial approach, whereas what actually constitutes improvement never is and never can really be settled (Pieterse, 2010:191).

Likewise, current development in the field of cognitive science further asserts the claim that history thinking might be directly connected to thinking development. "*Recent research has shown that the same brain areas are active when we remember past events and when we think about the future*" (Herbert, 2012). This breakthrough knowledge reaffirms the mental processes involved in rediscovering the past are practical elements in shaping the future. The past provides a concrete foundation to envision the future. Remembering events in the past using our memory allow us to plan and better prepare ourselves for whatever lies ahead.

History will not control our actions and determine the future rather it will help us understand the correlation of the past, present, and future. Learning our past and understanding it are needed to create a better future. Aptly stated that:

(t)he past does not determine the future, but it is the raw material from which the future will be made. To use this legacy properly, we must first understand it, not because the past is the key to the future, but because understanding yesterday frees us to create tomorrow (Kishlansky, Geary & O'Brien, 1995:5).

TRANSFORMING SOCIETY THROUGH SCHOOLS

In reality, our day to day actions – conscious or unconscious transform our society. Things unfold in countless possibilities. All led to a new epoch which all of us are part. Changes in landscape, perspectives, and views are evident as global structures are realigning and changing, and new opportunities are opening up.

Likewise, there are institutions that will continue to exist – the family, church, and school. These institutions should meet and adjust to the demands and challenges of new perspectives. But, then again, we could view these changes the other way around – that these changes happen as a result of a change of perspective from within. We keep in mind that schools and societies are interconnected. Within schools we hone the future of the world and educational institutions should take a stand. A special credit should be given to the school as an institution that could "really transform" the society.

Schools do not exist outside of history or culture, of course: they are, rather, at the heart of each – schools serve societies; societies shape schools. School is both mirror and window – it shows us what we value and what we ignore, what is precious and what is venal (Ayers, 2014:8).

Quite interesting a relative concept was proposed by Jose Rizal (1861-1896), the Philippine hero and patriot, regarding the connection of the school and society. But, instead of seeing schools as reactive to society, he posited that societies are made through schools; and schools are just a reflection of society. In his novel, *Noli Me Tangere* (1887), Jose Rizal explicitly stated that the school is the basis of our society.

(W)e are presiding over a ceremony of importance that you already understand without mentioning it. A school building is being put up. The school is the base of the society: the school is the book wherein is

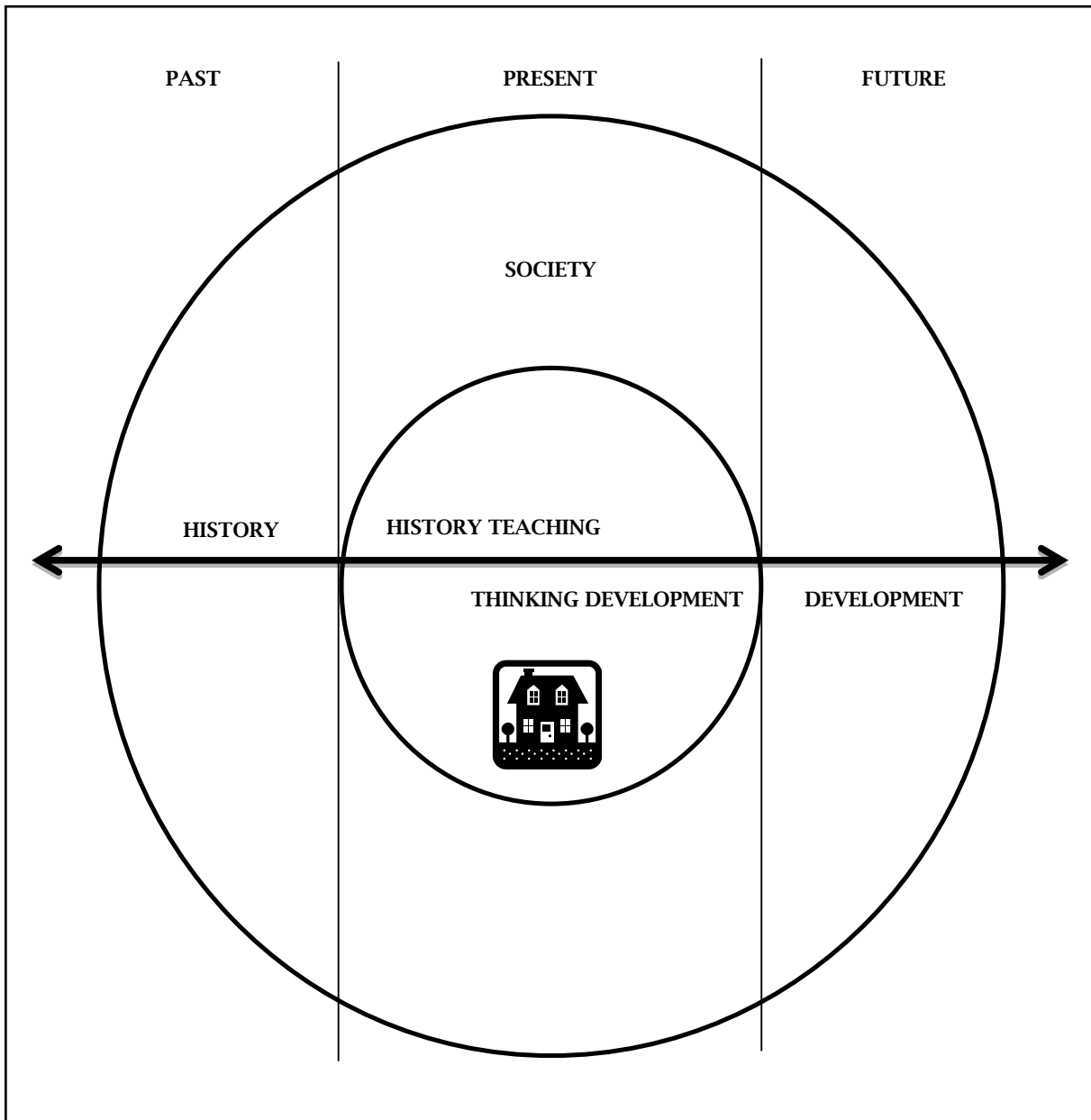


Diagram 1:

A Working Framework on History Teaching and Thinking Development

written the future of a people! Show us the school and we will show you the kind of people there are! (Rizal, 1887:291).

It is on this note that I will pursue my claim. If we want to change society, we should change “from within” our schools. And if history teaching should be relevant, we should seriously take it to a higher level. The intent is not only to memorize facts. Rather, the goal is to have a proper understanding of the

historical scholarship and methodology and the suitable application of the knowledge from this field. But, this could only be possible if history teaching is carried out effectively.

In the time continuum, the present is the defining moment for actions are made concrete in the present time. The diagram 1 emphasises that the society as a product of the past and is continuously being created in the

present time. At the heart of every society is the school which reflects the values and aspirations of the society. The school is where the youth is molded. And it is within the school where the study of the past and the foresight of the future meet. The school serves as converging point where historical knowledge is linked with development. History and development are linked through schools and teaching.

CONCLUSION

It is true that history and development are connected. History teaching provides an opportunity to transfer historical knowledge and skills. It is a powerful instrument to shape the future. But, it is quite deplorable that the current educational practice in schools on how to teach history is still tied with memorization of dates and people. The opportunity to think about development is lost. But, then again, schools are in the perfect position to salvage this condition. A change in perspective about history and development requires a change in pedagogy and output we expect when teaching history. Dates and peoples are important components of historical knowledge, but proper historical thinking is more essential in the utilization of this discipline.

Let the compass of history guide us and help us carve our future. Development anchored in historical thinking through our schools is a solid foundation to build the future. May we be reminded of Jose Rizal, Filipino Patriot, who said, "*He who does not know how to look back at where he came from will never get to his destination*" (Rizal, 1887); or from Abraham Lincoln's words, "*(t)he best way to build your future is to create it*" (cited in Brown, 2014).

Bibliography

- AHA [American Historical Association]. (2011). *Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct*. Washington D.C., USA: American Historical Association.
- Ayers, William. (2004). *Teaching toward Freedom*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Banks, James A. & Cherry A. McGee Banks [eds]. (2010). *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives*. USA: Wiley, seventh edition.
- Brown, Paul B. (2014). "The Best Way to Predict the Future". Available [online] also at: <http://www.inc.com/paul-b-brown/the-best-way-to-predict-the-future.html> [accessed in Manila, the Philippines: August 12, 2014].
- Collingwood, R.G. (2014). *The Idea of History*. New York: Martino Fine Books, first edition in 1946.
- Constantino, Renato & L.R. Constantino. (1993). *The Philippines: A Past Revisited*. Quezon City: Renato Constantino.
- Cowan, M. & R.W. Sheton. (1996). *Doctrines of Development*. London: Routledge.
- Gilderhaus, Mark. (1996). *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., third edition.
- Herbert, Wray. (2012). "Imagining the Future Involves Your Memory: Why We Tend to Predict Rosy Times Ahead", on May 7, 2012. Available [online] also at: www.scientificamerican.com [accessed in Manila, the Philippines: August 12, 2014].
- Kishlansky, Mark, Patrick Geary & Patricia O'Brien. (1995). *Civilization in the West*. New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 2nd edition.
- Langer, Ellen. (1997). *The Power of Mindful Learning*. USA: Da Capo Press.
- Mills, C. Wright. (1959). *The Sociological Imagination*. USA: Oxford University Press, Inc.
- Pieterse, Jan Nederveen. (2010). *Development Theory: Deconstructions/Reconstructions*. Singapore: SAGE Publication Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd, second edition.
- Rizal, Jose. (1887). *Noli Me Tangere*. Makati City: Bookmark, translated by Ma Soledad Lacson-Locsin in 1996.
- Woolcock, M. Szreter & V.S. Rao. (2010). "How and Why Does History Matter for Development Policy?" in *Policy Research Working Paper 5425*. New York: The World Bank Development Research Group.
- www.nchs.ucla.edu/history-standards/historical-thinking-standards/overview [accessed in Manila, the Philippines: August 13, 2014].