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Sharing Authority and Agency: A Multilogue Response to Goldenberg's "Youth Historians in Harlem," Part 2 of 2

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Education's Histories

methodological grist for the
history of education

Notes

¹ Eric Foner, *Who Owns History?: Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (Macmillan, 2003).

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Jack Dougherty

Editor's note: We sent Goldenberg's original essay to Dougherty for peer review. Dougherty's original review was shared with Goldenberg, who subsequently revised his essay. In turn, Dougherty has updated his review to reflect changes from the original to the revised essay. Rather than bury this behind-the-scenes exchange between the author and a reviewer, we share it to reveal more about the process of creating scholarship within the community of educational historians.

Barry Goldenberg's second essay in his three-part "Youth Historians in Harlem" series tells a compelling story about his experience on a collaborative historical research project between Harlem teens and Teachers College graduate students. Overall, the heart of this work challenges hierarchies of learning by reframing youth as the storytellers of their community and active participants in historical knowledge production, rather than passive recipients of pre-packaged truths. This second installment opens with a question borrowed from the title of Eric Foner's book, *Who Owns History?*, and argues that training and authorizing high school students as collaborative oral history interviewers challenges the traditional norms of knowledge-making.¹

The strongest aspects of Goldenberg's essay are the Harlem project's innovative oral history youth workshops, and his first-person recounting of what worked (and could be improved) as an instructor and guide.

Furthermore, this essay incorporates insights from the relevant oral history literature on ways of listening

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² Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2006); Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990).

³ Eliot Wigginton, *Sometimes a Shining Moment: The Foxfire Experience* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1986). This 1992 MacArthur “genius” award winner was later discredited. See Ronald Smothers, “‘Foxfire Book’ Teacher Admits Child Molestation,” *The New York Times*, November 13, 1992, sec. U.S., <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/13/us/foxfire-book-teacher-admits-child-molestation.html>. On the growth of youth media projects, see “Youth Media Organizations,” Freechild Project, 2008, <http://www.freechild.org/youthmedia.htm>.

⁴ Bernadette Anand et al., *Keeping the Struggle Alive: Studying Desegregation in Our Town* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002). See also their essay adapted for educational historians, Bernadette Anand et al., “Building Partnerships to Hear Freedom’s Heroes within Our Community,” *History of Education Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (April 1, 2004): 113–19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3218117>.

⁵ Foner, *Who Owns History?*, preface.

⁶ Roy Rosenzweig, “Can History Be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 93, no. 1 (2006): 117–46, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4486062>. See also essays on “The Wisdom of Crowds(ourcing)” section of Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki, eds., *Writing History in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), <http://www.press.umich.edu/4766562>.

(from the Perks and Thompson volume) and shared authority (from Michael Frisch).² Reading it immediately took me back to my own experience as a high school history teacher in Newark, New Jersey in the late 1980s, where my colleagues and I also learned about interviewing while teaching our 10th-grade students how to do it, and desperately searched for better models and resources to improve our practice. Even though we taught in urban schools, we found wisdom in the words of Foxfire rural educator Eliot Wigginton’s *Sometimes a Shining Moment* (before he was discredited), and also gained new ideas by visiting youth-run media projects in New York City, which have grown in number over the years.³ When I entered graduate school in the early 1990s, and finally had more time to read the literature in fields such as oral history, public history, and youth participatory action research, I found only a few exemplars that taught broader lessons beyond the borders of the case study setting. Years later, I had the good fortune to read Bernadette Anand et al.’s *Keeping the Struggle Alive*, which described the history of school integration in Montclair, New Jersey, and the pedagogy of the teachers and youth researchers who pieced together the story.⁴ We need more scholarship in the direction that Goldenberg and his colleagues are headed. For his final installment in this series, perhaps he could take advantage of *Education’s Histories* online format and insert links to curricular materials developed by the Youth Historians in Harlem project, to make both their inquiry-oriented process and underlying philosophy more accessible to other educators. Educators would benefit from reading their course materials on guiding youth to conduct oral history interviews, or the interview questions they prepared, the final transcripts, and student reflections about the process. By sharing more about what happened inside their classroom, Goldenberg and his colleagues can help spread their teaching practices to other educators who want to try, but need examples to build on.

In his introduction, Goldenberg asks “what would happen—and what would it look like in practice—when high school students were trained, and then ‘authorized’ as *scholars*, to also produce historical knowledge.” It’s a rich question, but also a dated and problematic one. When Eric Foner wrote his essays for *Who Owns History?* during the 1980s and 1990s, his formulation focused on history generated by central authorities. Foner targeted the dominance of historical knowledge production by corporations such as The History Channel, politicians arguing over national history standards, and monopolistic textbook publishers.⁵ While that debate continues, a broader controversy has erupted over the decentralized production of historical knowledge with the launch of *Wikipedia* (in 2001) and related websites. Thanks to the expanding Internet anyone can publish their historical interpretations—for better or worse—without being “authorized” to do so.⁶ The questions have changed since Foner penned his essay, and Goldenberg’s revised essay now acknowledges that issue in a note.



But Goldenberg’s essay still maintains the idea that people need to be “authorized” to create history, which troubles me. In a footnote in his earlier draft, he stated that “a main goal of the project was to help students internalize the notion that they are authorized to produce knowledge by virtue of their training and participatory role at Teachers College.” As a former high school teacher, I certainly understand that the Youth Historians project offers educational enrichment, digital literacy, and mentoring support to help young people step into their new role as authors of Harlem’s past. Academic institutions also provide credentials and credibility to augment one’s voice within larger communities. But I push back against the idea that people need to be “authorized”—or granted permission by some more powerful entity—to write history. Perhaps Goldenberg and I use the term differently here (or maybe this criticism reflects my psychological hangups about authority figures). But all of us would benefit from rethinking the formulation of this question (and Goldenberg has since revised his footnote in light of these comments). Furthermore, it’s striking that Goldenberg’s essay series appears here in *Education’s Histories*, an innovative online publication that did not exist a year ago, until its editors boldly launched it without being “authorized” to do so by any scholarly

association. Together, individual agency and the digital revolution have transformed who writes and publishes history.

A second and more significant challenge in Goldenberg's first draft was the missing perspectives of participants in the Youth Historians in Harlem project, which forced readers to rely on the author's viewpoint as the sole source of supporting evidence. Surprisingly, in an essay devoted to oral history and collaborative knowledge production, the voices of the most important participants were noticeably absent from the original draft. At several points in first essay, he described the process of co-conducting a collaborative oral history with Harlem Prep alumni, asserted that "the interview was a resounding success both in substance and in process," and claimed that "it seems that students' status as Harlem students mattered" because "students' agency to ask questions altered the trajectory of the interview." But Goldenberg's key claims were supported by fragmentary evidence at best, told entirely from the instructor's point of view. In the first draft the author described meaningful "eye contact" between Harlem residents and students, but did not include their actual words. In one brief scene, as a Harlem Prep alumna recalled her past experience with school racism and her present work as an African-American business owner, the author stated that "from my perspective, it was as if she was saying to students in a veiled coded language: 'this is what you are a part of, now go out and use this knowledge for the better.'" At this point I wanted the author to remove himself as the intermediary of data and let the Harlem alumna and youth speak for themselves. My original comments asked: Can the author underscore student voices in interview transcripts to show more clearly how their roles shaped the process? Did the author record students' reflections before and after they conducted interviews, or retain any students' thoughts that they wrote down during or after the workshops?

In the revised draft, Goldenberg responded by adding interview excerpts to offer more direct evidence from the perspective of the Harlem community members. This helps a great deal, but readers still have a limited viewpoint of the youth themselves. For example, Goldenberg argues that "power dynamics" at the interview table shifted from the Teachers College academics to the youth because "interviewees seemed to recognize that the youth were also co-experts. . ." But as a reader of this draft, I do not yet see evidence of student expertise. Looking closely at the interview excerpts, the adults still do most of the talking, and the students barely say anything. Based on what the author presents us, my reading is that the Harlem Prep alumni responded directly to the younger Harlem residents at the table, presumably of the same race, to engage them more deeply with their community history, not necessarily to recognize their current expertise. If Goldenberg interprets this scene differently, perhaps he can share more evidence about the background knowledge that

students acquired beforehand about Harlem Prep, or the interview questions students prepared in advance, or other ways that they communicated their expertise during the interview. Perhaps we will learn more about the youth historians—in their own words, either captured in interview recordings or their own writing about this project—in Part III of this series.

Goldenberg is correct that most historians who study contemporary communities typically do not engage youth as active participants in the knowledge-creation process, and that this is most problematic for historians of education, since we often focus our studies on young people. Why does this practice remain uncommon? As suggested by my criticisms above, this is very hard, messy, yet critically important work. Only sometimes is there a shining moment, as Wigginton titled his book about the student-driven local history writing process, which paralleled my experience with my 10th grade students and colleagues in Newark. Creating history this way requires rising scholars such as Goldenberg to not only tell a rich and compelling story about the past, but also to incorporate the agency and authorship of adolescents into the storytelling process. (If you're still writing your dissertation and trying to jump through those academic hoops, it's tempting to skip this collaborative process, as who needs the extra hurdle? Fortunately, Goldenberg thinks differently.) As I reflect on our profession and look at how most historians do their research in solitude, I get the impression that many of our colleagues prefer to study the past where our subjects remain quietly locked inside archival documents, do not talk back to us, or heaven forbid, criticize our interpretations of their community. But we all know that solitary strategies are not necessarily the best way to write the past, or to engage with the public about its significance. Instead, educational historians need more of what Goldenberg and his colleagues are driving toward, and perhaps we can learn something from the research and pedagogical methods of public historians, ethnographers, and youth media projects for direction on how to get there.

Education's Histories would like to thank Jack Dougherty for his careful review of Barry Goldenberg's essay, "[Youth Historians in Harlem: Exploring the Possibilities in Collaborative History Research Between Local Youth and Scholars \(Part 2 of 2\)](#)" and for allowing us to publish his review in our experimental multilogue format. If you would like to experiment with the multilogue format, please contact Education's Histories to respond to a published essay.





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