

Weekly Writing Assignment #8: Fixing a Broken Profession

-- Due in Section, week of 11/01 - 11/03 --

Past writing assignments have stressed the importance of distinguishing between primary and secondary sources: what they reveal, and how they can be used. On the first paper assignment, however, there was still some confusion about this, so this assignment revisits the issue. Primary sources were written at the time being studied: e.g. Louis and Drake are both primary sources for the study of early 19th century medicine. Secondary sources are written after the fact (typically by historians), using primary sources to describe and analyze what happened in the past: e.g. Starr is a secondary source for the history of the medical profession. When you write papers, primary sources can only be used as evidence of what happened in the past, what people thought in the past, etc. (e.g. Flint demonstrates that in the 19th century people traced diseases to the environment). They should not be used to support current truth claims (e.g. Flint would be the wrong choice to defend a claim that the environment currently influences health). Secondary sources are often more flexible. For instance Starr, who quotes many past characters, gives a sense of how 19th century doctors wanted to improve the profession. Starr, in his own analysis and interpretation, also gives a sense of what one modern scholar thinks about the past (and current) profession. When you use readings in this assignment, and in future papers and weekly assignments, always make sure you know who the author is, when he or she lived, and how the reading can be used to support historical analysis...

After reading an astute analysis of the role of healers in colonial society, Benjamin Waterhouse convinced Harvard College to found Harvard Medical School in 1783. However, the hopes for the school go unfulfilled. By 1860 the school is in shambles: illiterate students sit through a few boring lectures and then are set loose to practice medicine on an unsuspecting population. William Barton Rogers, who founded MIT in 1861, watched these events unfold. His oldest brother was a physician, and the two of them often talked about the problems faced by the profession. One day he gets an idea: maybe MIT should establish its own medical school. He calls you, one of his first undergraduate students, into his office with an assignment: if MIT wants to improve the quality of doctors and the medical profession, should it establish a new medical school, or should it help the Massachusetts Medical Society strengthen professional organizations and licensing laws?

He wants you to be able to defend your choice of strategy so, to get you started, he hands you two books: Drake's essay on medical education and a Starr's analysis of medical history (amazingly procured with a short-lived time machine

developed by an MIT engineer). “I know you’re busy with your other work, so keep it short (200 words), but be sure to use the sources carefully. If you mention specific material from the text, or use quotations, please provide page numbers.”