What Does It Mean to Think Historically... and How Do You Teach It?

Part of the difficulty in knowing what we mean by historical thinking has to do with whom we are talking about and in what context. Are we describing the historical thinking of the experts, or historians, and how they go about their work? Are we talking about novices, such as elementary school students, who perhaps are learning chronological, survey history for the first time in school? Or do we mean adolescents, those we might describe as intelligent novices? The historians can serve as a benchmark in relationship to which we can understand what the less sophisticated historical thinkers do. However, we must not unfairly hold novices to the standard set by the experts. The academic developmental distance between novices and experts in a gap that history teachers—through history education—can strive to close.

**Source Work**

Historians by definition spend most of their professional lives engaged in historical thought. In the initial investigatory phases of their work, they occupy themselves with reading and digesting the residues of the past left behind by our ancestors. Much of this residue remains in the form of documents or sources. "Source work," then, becomes staple in the investigative lives of these experts. Source work is a complex undertaking, requiring a form of critical literacy.* This involves the constant interrogation of documents and their authors. Historians know that there is a distinct difference between history (the product of their investigations) and the past (traces and artifacts that remain—historical data, if you will). They also know that not everything that happened in the past is available to us in the present and that what does remain is organized from someone's perspective. As a result, historians reconstruct (some might say create) the past based on questions they attempt to answer. Criteria are involved in selecting and recontracting the past, and these criteria relate to what is considered generally acceptable practice within the field, although this practice varies some and is often in dispute. The product, a "history," is subject to peer criticism based on these criteria.

Because sources represent varying perspectives regarding a question under investigation, historians learn to become attune at ascertaining the nature of these sources. Assessing sources is a complex process involving at least four interrelated and interconnected cognitive acts—identification, attribution, perspective judgment, and reliability assessment.*

* Identification involves knowing what a source is. This requires a series of steps in which the source is effectively interrogated by questions such as: What type of source is this—a journal, a diary, an image, a newspaper article? What is its appearance—does it seem older or newer; is

---

*Social Education* 210

---

"Research & Practice" established early in 2003, features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers."I am interested in using education research more often," history education researcher Bruce VanSledright states. "But I need it to be more accessible."--Walker C. Stanford

---

Bruce A. VanSledright

**Research & Practice** Editor, University of Wisconsin,
the handwriting clist. Is the drawing faded? When was it created? What is the grammar, spelling, and syntax? Knowing what a source is helps determine what questions can be asked of it, and what sort of evidence claims and interpretations can be drawn from the account.

A source is constructed by an author/artist (hereafter, simply author) for particular purposes. It also requires the author within her interpretive context. Recognizing that an author with an historically contextualized position constructed an account for a purpose and that it can function as evidence in building historical interpretations (i.e., producing history) is an important cognitive step.

Judging perspective involves a careful reading of a source followed by a set of assumptions as to the author's social, cultural, and political position. Leveling these types of judgments is difficult because the author is absent, unavailable for direct questioning about her position. The creative cognitive activity well meant historians study the content in which the sources were authored and wait to render judgments until a variety of accounts have been read. Mistaken some of the author's perspective or possibility often takes the form of reading between the lines, or below the surface of the text.

Reliability assessments involve historians in conclusion. Related accounts are assessed for their relative value as evidence used in making claims about what has occurred in the past. Judging the reliability of an account involves comparing it to other accounts from the period. The historian attempts to understand an author's claims to be corroborated elsewhere among documentary sources. A source has no intrinsic reliability; reliability is established by the investigator. Because sources are reliable only in relation to the questions that are asked of them, and because a source's reliability cannot be fixed definitively; judging reliability is almost always a relative and partial accomplishment, even among experts.

As historians pore through documents, they simultaneously begin to build theories and models about the past they are investigating. Once they have exhausted the archive of sources, they impose a theory of events using evidence attempting to craft an explanation that sticks as close as possible to a preponderance of that evidence. Because holes can exist in the evidence trail, historians need to use their imagination and fill in those holes. The result is an account that explains the past—a "history" of the event. Typically, histories written in narrative form using all the rhetorical strategies common to that genre.

Learning to Think Historically

Knowing what experts looks like gives history teachers some surged for what they might accomplish with their students (assuming they desire to move those students down the path towards greater expertise in historical thinking). Because the work of historical thinking is complex and often difficult, some teachers—particularly at the elementary and middle school levels—make the assumption that their students are incapable of engaging in such thought. This presumption has proven incorrect based on a host of studies conducted since about 1985. It turns out that children as young as age seven can begin to do source work by high school, with careful guidance from enthusiastic history teachers, students can learn to do it much as historians.

But what does this developmental progress from a novice's effort to greater expertise look like among learners? Research has not fully addressed this question, but we now can say much more about it than was possible in 1985.

Source work is arguably the sine qua non of historical thinking. At that end I concentrate on what's been learned about how grade-school students approach it as an example of progression in historical thinking is the direction of emerging expertise. Much of the research that permits this analysis has been done in England, initially by Dennis Shemm and more recently by Peter Lee and his colleagues on Project Chats. Other studies have followed in North America.

Children and adolescents (and, it should be noted, those who have learned to think historically) often approach sources as decontextualized, disembodied, authorless forms of neutral information that appear to fall out of the sky ready made. The younger the student, the more likely they will be to conclude that the past is either given or inaccessible to them. As students engage in source work (beginning they receive such opportunities), these former conclusions give way to the idea that we learn about the past via stories told about it and that these stories are stabilized by the information available. Differences that arise among sources are associated with gaps in information or simple mistakes. With continued source work and scaffolding from knowledgeable history teachers, a major epistemological shift occurs in how students understand the past and its relationship to "history" (recall, the products of historical investigation). Students come to realize that stories have authors and that these authors can hold very different perspectives on the same event or incident. Differences observed among sources come to be understood as a consequence of alterations (intentional or otherwise), bias, exaggeration, ideology, or the like. It is at this point that perspective assessment becomes a part of the learner's strategic and analytic cognitive capacity. However, there still may be problems.

The perspective-assessment effort frequently has been referred to as judging bias. Among learners who are taught to look at bias perspectives, bias detection appears to be a considerable preoccupation. However, for novices, it differs from the perspective assessments of the experts because bias detection takes on the character of a good-bad dichotomy (telling the truth or lying). Assessing perspective ultimately is concerned with understanding and explaining authentic intent in its fullest sense (to the extent that this is possible), with bias assumed to be a normal byproduct of an author's historicized position (race, class,
gender, nationality, etc.). Bias detection alone turns out to be a weak, and perhaps misleading subspecies of assessing perspective. Students need considerable help here in getting past this simplistic strategy. Learning how to assess the reliability of accounts and corroborate source evidence can be stymied by the dogmatic use of the truth–lie dichotomy. If all sources contain bias, and bias is associated with lying, then, as Ashby and Lee have noted, this renders learners helpless in the face of conflicting sources. As a result, interpretations of the past become virtually impossible to construct. Without the capacity to construct interpretations of the past, history becomes unattainable.

Teachers can help students drop their reliance on this truth–lie characterization and adopt a view that investigators, who provide us with evidence of the past, may hold quite legitimate positions that differ from one another, and that it is in the nature of sources to vary. Criteria for selecting from sources and corroborating the evidence they provide must be employed in order for history to become possible and understandable. The latter position is the one employed by historians.

**Teaching Historical Thinking**

So how can these ideas be taught? Let me draw on my own experience. I spent a semester with a group of diverse fifth graders a few years ago, teaching them American history and trying to push them down this path toward greater expertise as much as I have described above. I studied my own practice and collected data on what the students gained from the experience. I address that question in broad methodological terms in a separate essay.46

Everything I have been describing hinges on turning typical history instruction upside down. The common preoccupation with having students commit one fact after another to memory based on history textbooks recitations and lectures does little to build capacity to think historically. In fact, studies suggest that these practices actually retard the development of historical thinking because they foster the naive conception that the past and history are one and the same, fixed and stable forever.

I dropped out of the sky ready-made, that the words in the textbooks and lectures map directly and without distortion onto the past.47 Instead, what occurs in the classroom needs to involve source work, investigations into the traces and shards of the past, and much of it. Students— even the young ones—need opportunities to engage these sources, to learn to assess their status, and to begin building and writing up their own interpretations of the past.48 That way they engage the activity because they come to own the end product—that their own history, if I may put it that way.

Ambitious history teachers who take this journey will no doubt experience some frustrations here due to curriculum and testing constraints. I recognize that these constraints are real and can be invasive. But I believe that if teachers are committed to cultivating historical thinking in their students, they must push hard against these constraints, particularly against those that retard genuine historical understanding, such as reducing an entire American history survey course to thirty-seven multiple-choice questions.49 The more immediate difficulties, however, will center on being able to anticipate how students move their way across the progression I described. Some will be wont to shut their views from naive truths in history texts.

Students' movement away from this position and toward the idea that sources tell their own perspectives and that perspectives can be legitimate and still differ may be difficult to notice initially, making it difficult to seize on teachable moments. Preparing students with questions that get at such transformational thought can help. Watching the students learn about the task of assessing sources can also be revealing. Having them do source work in small groups frees teachers to circulate and listen in on what students talk about. Activities designed expressly to raise issues of perspective can also provide opportunities to hear where students are40 (e.g., studying the trial of testimony following the so-called Boston Massacre, reading the documentary evidence about what occurred at Lexington Green, or studying newspaper editorials written by southern blacks and whites on the issues of segregation prior to 1960s). Designing assessments that mirror the practice of investigating the past through source work is also important.

Asking students (again, even the young ones) to read a short set of documents and then write an interpretive essay mirrors the practice taught in the classroom. Such assessments can be graded both for the substantive knowledge students reveal and for the strategic and critical activities in which they engaged as they fashioned the essay.

Persistence, and more persistence after that, will be necessary. The changes will come slowly for many students. Being equipped with a good sense of what the most recent research (some of which was reviewed above and in previous issues of this Research and Practice column) tells us about the progression from novice to expertise will support persistence and eventual success.

Finally, it is probably fair to ask why anyone would want to focus this much attention on cultivating historical thinking in students. After all, nowhere does it say that the mission of the social studies is to provide the next generation of historians; nor is that my purpose. Historical thinking is a very close relative to active, thoughtful, critical participation in text- and image-rich democratic cultures. Consider what good historical thinkers can do. They are careful, critical readers and consumers of the mountains of evidentiary source data that exist in archives and that pour at us each day via the media. Good historical thinkers are tolerant of differing perspectives because these perspectives help them make sense of the past. At the same time, such thinkers are skilled at detecting spin, hype, snake-oil sales pitches, disguised agendas, veiled partisanship, and weak claims. They also know what it means to build and defend evidentiary-based arguments because of practice construct- ing interpretations rooted in source data. In short, they are informed, educated, thoughtful, critical readers, who appreciate investigative enterprises, know good arguments when they hear them, and who engage that world with a host of
strategies for understanding it. As I have written elsewhere, Thomas Jefferson could hardly have wanted better citizens than these whiskers! I can imagine few better purposes for this on which to confide a school subject.

Notes

2. For elaborations on this point, see Bruce V. MacGillivray, *Steal of America’s Past: Learning to Read History* (in press).


11. MacGillivray, *Steal of America’s Past: Learning to Read History* (in press). This is an admirable detail: we should all be more likely to focus on the specific events that are of importance.


14. See, for example, Winthrop, *Historical Thinking*, 63-98, and Bruce V. MacGillivray, "I Warn You: Remember the Whig; We Are All Jumshed in My Mind!" Taught History: Rediscovery of Colonial American History," Journal of Curriculum and Supervision in 1995; 977-995.

MAKE IDEAS COUNT
(Any school teacher can enroll)

- Join classrooms online across the country in a "symbolic dialogue" with the President using the "Future Molding Game" (Stuart C. Dodd) and "social audits" to help think about the future in an essential process of "Psycho-Social Moratorium" (Erik Erickson, i.e., a "timeout space to talk").
- In one class period present the State of the Union Address, engage students in four rounds in discussions, and collect their anonymous opinions online using the Fast Forum technique, without cost. Anonymous responses of parents can also be included.
- Teachers can use the State of the Union Address to teach citizenship and critical thinking skills and create reports from the anonymous responses of students (and their parents and other adults when available) for later reflection in both classroom and home.

Forum Foundation
Enhancing Communication in Organizations and Society
Enroll at our website at ForumFoundation.org

April 2004
WWW