

Which Literacy Skills do Historians Employ?

Perhaps more than any discipline area, researchers have explored the literacies used by historians as they construct meaning with historical texts. Researchers suggest that historians are extraordinarily active readers, comparing them to attorneys who interrogate evidence (Wineburg, 1991, 2001). Historians' work involves a balancing act between carefully examining evidence and trying to imagine what things were like in the past. Historians' literacy skills range from observation and reasoning to visualization and imagination. Historians do not view texts as conveyers of information, as students often do, but as the product of individuals with emotion, flawed perception, a particular point of view, conflicts of interest, and personal insights. Further, they acknowledge that texts can be interpreted in multiple ways, which opens the door for historical debates, continued investigation of old questions, and the regular rewriting of history. Thus, reading historical texts requires more than the comprehension of the meaning of words and sentences; it requires an understanding of the subtext – the context, audience, purposes, biases, and insights of the author (Lesh, 2011; Perfetti, *et al.*, 1999; Wineburg, 1994).

Historical literacy requires a critical analysis of evidence, always keeping the source in mind. Wineburg (1991) and other researchers identify this technique as “sourcing.” **Sourcing** is a universal and instinctive heuristic employed by historians. When they pick up an unfamiliar text they look first at the author, consider the context of its creation, and begin to build expectations about its content even before reading (Wineburg, 1991). Texts are viewed as extensions of individuals. Historians' reading, then, is an exchange with people, separated by time and place, but connected through the writing/creation and reading/interpretation of texts.

Additionally, historians compare and contrast evidence from multiple sources, a strategy labeled “corroboration” (Wineburg, 1991). **Corroboration** involves checking and cross checking evidence (VanSledright, 2002). As historians encounter new information in a primary source, they search for verification in other sources, holding new interpretations as tentative until substantiating evidence can be found. They also pay attention to and account for conflicting evidence. Corroboration allows historians to evaluate the validity and reliability of various sources. Additionally, corroboration, when coupled with sourcing, allows historians to gain the advantage of having multiple perspectives of an event. For instance, if studying the Battle of Little Bighorn, historians would corroborate across oral histories from the Sioux and Cheyenne, written records from the U.S. Army, artifacts from the battle site, personal writings that provide insight on Native American and U.S. military leaders, and other sources (Lesh, 2011). Their interpretations are bolstered when multiple sources point to their conclusions.

One of the challenges of studying the past is that it is always done through the lens of the present. Today's values, attitudes, and environment differ from those of past generations. This explains why the actions of historical characters often

seem odd to us today. It is difficult, particularly for students, to consider the past without making judgments based on modern standards. However historians attempt to do this – to understand the past on its own terms – in their investigation of historical texts. Researchers have labeled historians' efforts to understand the physical and cultural context of a text's creation as “**contextualization**” (Wineburg, 1991). Historians use their rich background knowledge, as well as clues in texts (Wineburg, 1998), to imagine the context of the document's creation. They attempt to construct meaning with the document with that context in mind, putting out of mind, as much as possible, the present.

Different aspects of the context can take on importance. The linguistic context is important in comprehending written texts because the meaning and use of words can change over time. For instance, during Shay's Rebellion, when George Washington wrote to General Benjamin Lincoln asking if the farmers of Massachusetts were “mad,” he was not asking whether they were angry but if they were crazy (Washington, 1786). The physical context gains significance in working with artifacts. For instance, archeologists painstakingly document the precise location of artifacts in relation to other artifacts in an archeological dig. The physical context carries implications about the way an artifact may have been used. Further, the timing of a document's creation can influence its usefulness as a source. Individuals who write immediately after an event often remember details, but lack the perspective that time can give. For instance, when studying documents related to the battle of Lexington, one historian pointed out that an account had been written several years after the battle at the end of the Revolutionary War. Although the author was an eyewitness, because the account didn't match other eyewitness accounts, the historian concluded that the author might have confused events from later battles in his memory of events on Lexington Green years earlier (Wineburg, 1991).

Further, contextualization involves a consideration of the broad context of an event – the macro-context, as well as the immediate context – micro-context. The macro-context includes societal trends, the language of the time period, etiquette, common values, generally accepted theories, and familiar national and international events. The micro-context includes immediate factors that influence an event such as the weather, the day of week of the event, and whether the people involved in the event had had a good night's sleep. I've found that students can sometimes infer some elements of the micro-context from documents, but they have a more difficult time keeping in mind the macro-context.

A strategy similar to contextualization is historical empathy or perspective taking. Historical empathy replaces the deficit view of people in the past (i.e. the notion that people in the past were intellectually and culturally inferior to us) with the understanding that people's decisions generally make sense given their current knowledge, technologies, and values (Foster, 2001; Lee, 2005; Lesh, 2011). Historical empathy is the process of considering an individual's context in an effort to understand his/her actions. It is not purely an emotional process,

like empathy in the traditional sense, but is a cognitive and logical process – an important part of understanding historical actions.

In addition to sourcing, corroboration, contextualization, and historical empathy, historians make inferences. Historians must “read between the lines” as they construct interpretations. VanSledright (2002) points out that often the greatest challenge historians face is not synthesizing information from conflicting sources, but filling in gaps when no evidence exists, a process also referred to as “historical imagination.” Collingwood shows that what is inferred, is imagined (1993). Unlike pure imagination, historical imagination that is used in making inferences is constrained by evidence and reason (Collingwood, 1993; Levesque, 2008). The development of historical inferences and interpretations is the heart of historical literacy. It involves skillfully using evidence when it is available; employing sourcing, corroboration, and contextualization; and blending logic and imagination to fill in the gaps when the historical record is silent. As Collingwood described, history is “a web of imaginative construction stretched between certain fixed points provided by [critically analyzed evidence]” (1993, 242). Historians make inferences about historical motives, purposes, causes, or trends.

Which Habits of Mind Characterize Historians’ Work?

In addition to the skills described above, there are several habits of mind that historians demonstrate, perspectives on working with evidence and developing interpretations, that influence their use of texts. Historians approach a historical question with a mature epistemic stance (Reddy & VanSledright 2010). They understand that **history is not the past, but instead is a study of the past based on the incomplete and imperfect record that has been left behind.** They acknowledge that there is not a single historical narrative but that multiple interpretations are possible. Further, they understand that not all interpretations are equally valid, making judgments based on the way evidence was used.

Additionally, historians maintain a healthy skepticism as they approach texts. They do not accept information in any text at face value but critically evaluate text content with the source in mind. Texts do not convey information but, instead, represent an individual’s viewpoint, parts of which the historian may or may not accept as reliable based on a great number of factors. They maintain the power of the “line item veto” to discount any part of a text that they judge to be inaccurate (Wineburg, 1994).

Further, **historians maintain an open mind, holding interpretations as tentative.** They understand that new evidence, which regularly surfaces, or new ways of thinking about the past, lead to a constantly evolving understanding of history. Perfetti and his colleagues (1999) hypothesized that as historians engage in inquiry they not only construct an understanding of an event (labeled a “situation model” in literacy research), but they also construct alternative explanations (labeled “hypothetical situation models” by Perfetti). As more evidence is encountered,

historians lean toward certain interpretations, but alternative interpretations are not completely dismissed. Thus, historians, though skeptical about all interpretations, remain open to new, evidence-based theories. Ironically, Wineburg (1991) found that students were much more confident in their naïve understanding of the past than were historians of their sophisticated interpretations.

Historians’ habits of mind are based on their understanding of important concepts related to historical methodology and general historical thinking. Such concepts include evidence, accounts, change, continuity, time, and cause. A correct understanding of these concepts, sometimes labeled second order concepts or metaconcepts, is key to historians’ work (Lee, 2005).

The Need for Secondary Students to Receive Historical Literacy Instruction

Historians’ professional activities contrast sharply with traditional history teaching methods. I can think of no other discipline where the work of students differs more drastically from the work of professionals. In science, students do labs. In gym class, they play sports. In English class, they write poetry. In music class, they perform in ensembles. And in industrial arts they work with the same tools carpenters use. However, in history, students typically listen to lectures and memorize information, activities that do not reflect historical thinking. Students are so distanced from historical processes that they typically have no inkling of how historians go about their work. I recently interviewed 30 5th grade students, asking, among other things how they thought historians spent their time. Students confused the work of historians with paleontologists, history makers (such as explorers or pilgrims), or simply admitted they didn’t know what historians did. They imagined them surfing Wikipedia, watching the history channel, or listening to lectures, all processes more closely associated with the way students learn history than with actual historical inquiry. Most students can’t imagine the work of historians because they have never experienced anything like it.

Unfortunately, many people are satisfied with traditional history teaching. In fact, the teaching of historical literacies has been controversial in the past. For example, the United States educator and eventual president, Woodrow Wilson, was afraid that the complex cognitive processes of historical thinking exceeded students’ abilities. He contended that “we must avoid introducing what is called scientific history in the schools for it is [a] history of doubt, criticism, examination of evidence. It tends to confuse young people” (VanSledright, 2002, vii).

Indeed, the confusion of young people in working with historical texts has been well documented. Without support, they struggle when exposed to historians’ texts and when asked to engage in historians’ literacies. For example, Sam Wineburg (1991) compared think aloud protocols of historians with the protocols of advanced high school students as they negotiated meaning with multiple texts related to the Battle of Lexington. He found that the students, unlike the

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