

# SOCIAL STUDIES TODAY

Research & Practice

Walter C. Parker, Editor



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

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There is a lot of talk these days about thinking historically. Policy makers use the term. So do teachers, curriculum writers, test makers, and administrators. And above all researchers use it—a lot. A number of articles have been published in this very column concerning the topic, many by those who do history-education research. Some might argue that the term “thinking historically” has become nothing more than educational jargon, that educators use it as a metaphor for a significantly broad range of activities that occur in any given social studies classroom. Others might say that the term means different things to different people. As a result, it can be difficult to know what it means to teach it.

In what follows, I will attempt to address the question I pose in the title. I hope to clarify what might be meant by historical thinking and therefore shed some light on how it could more successfully be taught. I address the question as a former history teacher—thirteen years in secondary schools ending in 1989, with a return in 1999 to a fifth-grade classroom for part of the year—and as a history-education researcher who has been studying historical thinking among teachers and students for fourteen years. The question the title poses has been something I have been deeply interested in since I first began teaching history. It has puzzled and perplexed me as a teacher and also as a researcher.

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

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developmental distance between novices and experts is 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.<sup>1</sup> In the initial investigative 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 a staple in the investigative lives of these experts. Source work is a complex undertaking, requiring a form of critical literacy.<sup>2</sup> 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 reconstructing 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.<sup>3</sup> The product, a “history,” is subject to peer criticism based on those criteria.

Because sources represent varying perspectives regarding a question under investigation, historians learn to become astute at assessing 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.<sup>4</sup>

- **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 account is this—a journal, a diary, an image, a newspaper article? What is its appearance—does it seem older or newer; is the paper brittle; is the handwriting clear, is the drawing faded? When was it created? What is the grammar, spelling, and syntax? Knowing what a source is helps the historian determine what questions can be asked of it, and what sorts of evidence claims and interpretations can be drawn from the account.<sup>5</sup>
- **Attribution** involves recognizing that a source is constructed by an author/artist (hereafter, simply author) for particular purposes. It also requires locating the author within her historical 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.

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- **Judging perspective** involves a careful reading of a source followed by a set of assessments 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 or authorial intent. To engage this cognitive activity well means historians study the context in which the source was authored and wait to render judgments until a variety of accounts have been read. Making sense of the author's perspective or positionality<sup>6</sup> often takes the form of reading between the lines, or below the surface of the text.<sup>7</sup>
- **Reliability assessment** involves historians in corroboration. 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 if an author's claims can be corroborated elsewhere among documentary sources. A source has no innate 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 and assess their status, 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 on the 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 trails, historians need to use their imagination to fill in those holes. The result is an account that explains the past—a “history” of the event. Typically, histories are written in narrative form using all the rhetorical strategies common to that genre.<sup>8</sup>

### Learning to Think Historically

Knowing what expertise looks like gives history teachers some targets 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 presumption that their students are incapable of engaging in such thought. This presumption has proven inaccurate based on a host of studies conducted since about 1985.<sup>9</sup> It turns out that children as young as age seven can begin to do source work. By high school, with careful guidance from ambitious history teachers, students can learn to do it much as historians.

But what does this developmental process 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. To that end I concentrate on what's been learned about how grade-school students approach it as an example of progression in historical thinking in the direction of emerging expertise. Much of the research that permits this analysis has been done in England, initially by Denis Shemilt and more recently by Peter Lee and his colleagues on Project Chata.<sup>10</sup> Other studies have followed in North America.<sup>11</sup>

Children and adolescents (and, it should be noted, adults who never 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 students, the more likely they will be to conclude that the past is either given or inaccessible or both. As students engage in source work (assuming 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 distortions (intentional or otherwise), bias, exaggeration, ideology, partisanship, and 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 author perspective, 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 authorial intent in its fullest sense (to the extent that this is possible), with bias assumed to be a natural 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.<sup>12</sup> As a result,

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interpretations of the past become virtually impossible to construct. Without the capacity to construct interpretations of the past, history becomes unachievable.

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. This 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 much as I have described it above. I studied my own practice and collected data on what the students gained from the experience. I address this question in broad strokes based on what I learned.<sup>13</sup>

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 textbook 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 naïve conception that the past and history are one and the same, fixed and stable forever, dropped out of the sky ready-made, that the words in the textbooks and lectures map directly and without distortion onto the past.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> That way they engage the activity because they come to own the end product—their own histories, if I may put it that way.

Ambitious history teachers who take to 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.<sup>16</sup> The most immediate difficulties, however, will center on being able to anticipate how students move their way across the progression I described. Some will be reticent to shift their views from naïve trust in history texts.

Students' movement away from this position and toward the idea that sources all bear perspectives and that perspectives can be legitimate and still differ may be difficult to notice initially, making it difficult to seize on teachable moments. Peppering students with questions that get at such transformation in thought can help. Watching how students go 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 are" (e.g., studying the trail 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 1960).

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 criterial 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 naivete to expertise will support persistence and eventual success.

Finally, it probably is 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 exists in archives and that pours 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 evidence-based arguments because of practice constructing 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 their world with a host of strategies for understanding it. As I have written elsewhere, Thomas Jefferson could hardly have wanted better citizens than these thinkers.<sup>17</sup> I can imagine few better purposes than this on which to center a school subject.

## Notes

1. I draw here on the studies of historians and their cognitive processes conducted by Sam Wineburg. See his *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).
2. For elaborations on this point, see Bruce VanSledright, *In Search of America's Past: Learning to Read History in Elementary School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 151–153.
3. Peter Lee and Rosalyn Ashby, “Progression in Historical Understanding among Students Ages 7–14,” in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, eds. Peter Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 199–222.
4. For more on these four cognitive moves, see Bruce VanSledright and Peter Afflerbach. “Assessing the Status of Historical Sources: An Exploratory Study of Eight U.S. Elementary Students Reading Documents,” in *International Review of History Education, Volume 4: Children's and Teachers' Ideas About History*, ed. Peter Lee (London: Woburn Press, 2005), 1–20.
5. Rosalyn Ashby and Peter Lee, “Information, Opinion, and Beyond” (Paper presented at the American Education Research Association annual meeting, San Diego, Calif., April 1998).
6. Bruce VanSledright, “From Empathic Regard to Self-Understanding: Im/positionality, Empathy, and Historical Contextualization,” in *Development of Historical Empathy: Perspective Taking in Social Studies*, eds. O.L. Davis, Jr., Elizabeth Yeager, and Stuart Foster (Lanham, Md.: Rowman Littlefield, 2001), 51–68.
7. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking*, 63–88.
8. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).
9. Reviews and/or references to many of these studies can be found in, for example, Keith Barton and Linda Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004); Mario Carretero and James Voss, *Cognitive and Instructional Processes in History and the Social Sciences* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994); S.G. Grant, *History Lessons: Teaching, Learning, and Testing in U.S. High School Classrooms* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003); Linda Levstik and Keith Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle School* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997); Stearns, et al., *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning*; VanSledright, *In Search of America's Past*, 1–23, 105–155; Wineburg, *Historical Thinking*, 28–60.
10. Denis Shemilt, *History 13–16 Evaluation Study* (Edinburgh: Holmes McDougall, 1980); Lee and Ashby, “Progression in Historical Understanding.”
11. See note 9.
12. Ashby and Lee, “Information, Opinion, and Beyond.”
13. VanSledright, *In Search of America's Past*. In chapters three through five of this book, I lay out in considerable detail my daily efforts to move my fifth graders toward greater expertise in thinking historically. See also David Gerwin and Jack Zevin, *Teaching U.S. History as Mystery* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2003) and James Percoco, *A Passion for the Past: Creative Teaching of U.S. History* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1998).
14. See for example Wineburg, *Historical Thinking*, 63–88, and Bruce VanSledright, “I Don't Remember—the Ideas are All Jumbled in My Head: Eighth Graders'



Reconstructions of Colonial American History," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 10 (1995): 317–345.

15. See VanSledright and Afflerbach, "Assessing the Status" for a description of how fourth graders (nine-year-olds) can be taught and actually learn a number of initial steps in assessing the status of sources.
16. On this point, see also Grant, *History Lessons*, 187–212.
17. VanSledright, *In Search of America's Past*.