Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts

Background: Sam Wineburg is a professor of Education at Stanford University. Much of his research has focused on understanding the various ways that students and historians interpret history.

Directions: Read and highlight the excerpts below and answer the questions on the last page. Be prepared to discuss it in class.

In this book, I try to show that historical thinking, in its deepest forms, is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development. In fact, it actually goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think… (p. 7)

The Weaving of Context

I put together a series of documents that combined the words of Abraham Lincoln with the voices of some of his contemporaries… and presented these documents to a group of college students… One group took Lincoln’s words at face value. They saw these words as offering a direct window into Lincoln’s mind, unobstructed by either the particular circumstances in which they were created or the passage of time from 1860 to today. Lincoln was a racist, pure and simple. Other, more careful, readers recognized that they needed a context for these words. But rather than fashioning a context from the raw materials provided by these documents, they borrowed a context from their present-day social world…

“Presentism”—the act of viewing the past through the lens of the present—is not some bad habit we have fallen into. Instead, it is our basic psychological condition, a way of thinking that requires little effort and comes quite naturally…

I broadened my study by asking several professional historians to read these same documents. Some of them knew a great deal about Lincoln and had written books about him, others knew only the basic information they learned in high school or college… From Document 1, Bob Alston (a historian who did not specialize on Lincoln or the Civil War) stared his lack of knowledge in the face… he asked, on average, 4.2 questions per document and emphasized what he did not know (“I don’t have enough to go on” or “This makes no sense to me”) a total of 14 times… He repeatedly went back to the documents to reread and to draw connections. Although he started the task confused and full of questions, he ended up with a sophisticated understanding of Lincoln’s position.

What Alston did is often referred to as “placing” Lincoln into context, which brings to mind images of a jigsaw puzzle in which each piece fits into a pre-existing frame. Contexts are neither “found” nor “located,” and words are not “put” into context. Context, from the Latin contexere, means to weave together, to engage in a process of connecting things in a pattern…

Alston’s expertise lay not in his expansive knowledge of the topic, but in his ability to get a fix on what he does not know and to generate a road map to guide his new learning. It was his ability to stand back from first impressions, to question his quick leaps of mind, and to keep track of his questions that together pointed him in the direction of new learning. Such an approach requires skill, technique, and practice…

Alston shows a humility before the narrowness of our contemporary experience and an openness before the expanse of the history of humanity. It grants people in the past the benefit of the doubt by casting doubt on our ability to know them as easily as we know ourselves. This does not mean that we
cannot judge the past—we cannot help making judgments. But it does mean that we must not rush to judgment. Other readers used these documents to confirm their prior beliefs; they encountered the past and labeled it. Alston encountered the past and learned from it…

The narcissist sees the world—both the past and the present—in his own image. Mature historical thinking teaches us to do the opposite: to go beyond our own image, to go beyond our brief life, and to go beyond the fleeting moment in human history into which we have been born. (p. 18-24)

The Skilled Reading of History

What the historian sees in a document cannot merely be found on the page. What is most important to him is not what it says, but what it does… It is not the literal text, or even the inferred text, that the historian seeks, but the subtext, a text of hidden meanings. Historians try to reconstruct the author’s purposes, intentions and goals. They analyze the author’s use of language as a tool for persuasion. Historians also search for unintended clues that reveal information about the author’s assumptions, beliefs, and world view…

Even among “less knowledgeable” historians (those reading documents relating to topics outside of their area of expertise), we see the same general approach in how they read documents. For historians, documents go beyond a neutral description of events… The literal text is only the shell of the information comprehended by historians. Texts come not to convey information, to tell stories, or even to set the record straight. Texts emerge as social interactions set down on paper that can be understood only by reconstructing the social context in which they occurred. The comprehension of text reaches beyond words and phrases to embrace intention, motive, purpose, and plan—the same set of concepts we use to decipher human actions…

When asked to rank the relative trustworthiness of eight documents about the battle of Lexington at the start of the American Revolution, historians ranked the high school American history textbook dead last, even less trustworthy than an excerpt from a historical fiction novel. And for good reason, since the textbook passage contradicts primary accounts and emphasizes the heroism of historical figures…

However, students in AP U.S. History ranked the textbook as the most trustworthy document. One student stated that the textbook was “just reporting the facts in a concise, journalistic way, just saying what happened. This was the typical student response, viewing the textbook as a neutral account.

Overall the students had little problem formulating the main idea of these documents, predicting what might come next, locating information in the text, and answering both factual and critical questions about the content of the text. When analyzing the textbook, however, few students recognized that labeling the encounter at Lexington (in which 8 colonists were killed) as an “atrocity” slants the account by implying associations with other atrocities, such as the Holocaust… In sum, students failed to see the textbook as a document skillfully crafted to achieve a social objective [to instill patriotism]. (p. 65-68)

Students face many potential “comprehension failures.” Basic problems include failure to understand a word, failure to understand a sentence, and failure to understand how the whole text fits together. Specific problems in the comprehension of historical documents include failure to understand the author’s intention, failure to grasp the passionate argument of the text, failure to recognize the connotations (implied additional meanings) of words, and failure to situate the document in its appropriate historical context…

As historical texts become richer and conceptually denser, readers may slow down not because they fail to comprehend, but because the very act of comprehension demands that they stop to talk with their texts… In plain English, they pretend to deliberate with others by talking to themselves. (p. 69-70)

The Nature of Historical Knowledge

When we compare how historians and students read these documents, we see dramatic differences in practically every way. By itself, this news should shock no one; after all, historians know much more
history… But what does it mean to “know more history”? What goes on when a historian who specializes in medieval Islamic texts sits down to read about the American Revolution? Several AP students scored better than the historians on tests containing factual recall questions. But knowing history is more complicated than answering such questions. The fact that students so rarely saw subtexts in what they read, that their understanding of point of view was limited to which “side” a document supported, that they rarely compared one account with another and instead searched for the “right” answer and became flustered by contradictions—all hint at a need for something more than knowing names and dates.

The differences in each group’s approach can be traced, I think, to sweeping beliefs about historical inquiry… For students, reading history was simply a process of gathering information, not a process of inquiring about author’s intentions… Before students can see subtexts, they must first believe they exist. In the absence of such beliefs, students simply overlooked or did not know how to seek out features designed to shape their perceptions or make them view events in a particular way. Students may have “processed texts,” but they failed to engage with them…

Whereas the historians relied on “sourcing” (the practice of reading the source of the document before reading the actual text) nearly 98% of the time, students used it only 31% of the time. For most students, the text’s attribution (source information) carried no special weight. To historians, sources were viewed as people, not objects, representing the belief that texts are defined by their authors. When texts are viewed as human creations, what is said becomes inseparable from who says it…

The metaphor of the courtroom may help us understand these differences. Historians worked through these documents as if they were lawyers: they did not merely listen to testimony but actively drew it out by putting the documents side by side, locating discrepancies, questioning sources, and investigating their conscious and unconscious motives. Students, on the other hand, were like jurors: patiently listening to testimony and questioning themselves about what they heard, but unable to question witnesses directly or subject them to cross-examination. For students, authority was in the text; for historians, authority was in the questions they formulated about the text.

What accounts for the fact that a group of bright high school seniors displayed such an elementary sense of how to read a historical text? How could they know so much history yet have so little sense of how to read it? At the very least, we can point to the types of texts students read in their history classes. Textbooks dominate history classrooms, and as Peter Schrag has noted, they are often written “as if their authors did not exist at all, as if they were simply the instruments of a heavenly intelligence transcribing official truths.” The indications of judgment, emphasis, and uncertainty, is frequently used in historical writing but appeared rarely in conventional textbooks. Textbooks avoid hedges like “may” or “might,” “appears” or “perhaps,” providing little indication that interpretation had anything to do with the words on the page. Such writing may contribute to students’ inability to move beyond the literal meaning.

College students can easily decipher the basic meaning of texts, however they paraphrase rather than analyze, and summarize rather than criticize texts… Their representations of text are closely tied to content: they read for information. Our students may believe that if they understand all the words and can paraphrase the content then they have successfully read the text. What many students fail to understand is that reading is not merely a way to learn new information, but a way to engage in new kinds of thinking. (p. 75-78)

We Are All Historians

In the early 1930s, historian Carl Becker wrote a paper entitled “Everyman His Own Historian,” in which he claimed that, like it or not, we are all historians. What he meant was that we are all called on to engage in historical thinking—called on to see human motive in the texts we read; called on to mine truth from the quicksand of innuendo, half-truth, and falsehood that seeks to engulf us each day; called on to brave the fact that certainty, at least in understanding the social world, remains elusive and beyond our grasp. (p. 82-83)
Reading Questions:

1. What is “presentism”? What are the advantages and disadvantages of viewing the world this way while studying history?

2. How was historian Bob Alston’s approach to reading the Lincoln documents different from the methods used by college students? Give several specific examples.

3. What is the subtext of a document? How does understanding subtext play an important role in the way historians examine and evaluate documents? Why is “sourcing” critical to analyzing the subtext of a document?

4. What factors determine the reliability (or trustworthiness) of a document? How and why did the students and historians differ in their explanation of which American Revolution documents were most reliable?

5. Explain the metaphor that historians are lawyers.