Recognizing and Addressing the Barriers to Adolescents' "Reading Like Historians"

Jeffery D. Nokes
Brigham Young University

IN RECENT YEARS, there has been a growing body of research investigating how historians read,[1] how children and adolescents read historical materials,[2] and how teachers attempt to help adolescents read like historians.[3] This research suggests that historians, unlike students, are unusually skillful readers employing several heuristics to construct meaning with multiple sources. Historians demonstrate reading processes that literacy advocates desire for adolescents, including the ability to comprehend multiple genres and modes of text, analyze and interpret text content, synthesize information from multiple texts, and evaluate and use the things they read.[4] Thus, educators have an interest in helping students read like historians.

On the other hand, there is much evidence that students rarely engage in sophisticated reading processes in secondary history classes.[5] Some researchers contend that the overuse of the history textbook limits opportunities for students to read like historians.[6] But even when teachers provide the types of materials historians typically use (i.e., primary source documents), students do not spontaneously use historians' heuristics.[7] In fact, when given a choice, students often place greater trust in the textbook than more reliable sources.[8] They simply do not question its authority.[9]

Researchers have investigated a wide variety of instructional methods designed to help students read like historians. For example,

in one Advanced Placement U.S. History class, researchers tracked the development of students as they wrote and were given feedback on a series of document-based argumentative essays over the course of a school year.[10] In another setting, researchers designed and tested a computer program called *Sourcer's Apprentice*, which gave direct instruction on historians' heuristics of sourcing (i.e., using source information to comprehend and analyze a document's content) and corroboration (i.e., comparing and contrasting accounts in different sources) and then provided scaffolding as students practiced the strategies.[11] Other studies investigated the effects of combining explicit instruction on historians' methods with writing instruction[12] and of providing a series of reading lessons that introduced students to historians' heuristics and then gave them opportunities to practice the heuristics with support.[13]

Although several studies have shown that students can learn to use some of the historians' heuristics, few have shown that adolescents can read like historians on more than a superficial level. For example, even when students notice a document's source, they may misuse source information in interpreting the document's content, such as was the case in Wineburg's study when high school students trusted the textbook because, as one reported, textbooks "just contain the facts."[14] Or, when critically evaluating texts, they might misapply background knowledge as in VanSledright's work with 5th graders whom he suspected were influenced heavily in their analysis of the "starving time" at Jamestown by Disney's movie *Pocahontas*.[15]

This paper will review for history teachers and history teacher educators the barriers to adolescents' reading like historians and introduce them to research-supported interventions that nurture historical literacy. These barriers extend beyond students' failure to use historians' heuristics, and include fundamental differences between historians and students in the way they view historical inquiry, the reading process, and the texts they read. There is evidence that these differences are rooted in students' cognitive development, knowledge base and experience, view of the world, and view of the discipline of history. Each of these issues will be considered within the framework of the historical literacy research cited above, which is rooted in socio-cultural theory,[16] and theories of cognitive constructivism.[17]

There are several concepts from these theories that are particularly relevant to the discussion that follows. First, research on cognitive processes shows that all individuals, expert and novice alike, have limited cognitive resources at their disposal at any given time. Researchers refer to the cognitive resources with which an individual can devote conscious attention as "working memory." They suggest that an individual's working memory is surprisingly limited.[18] Difficult cognitive tasks, such as synthesizing information from multiple challenging texts, can overload

an individual's cognitive resources. But, with practice, some processes become automatic and no longer occupy working memory. History teachers must remain aware of the cognitive load that historical reading and reasoning places on students. Second, cognitive constructivists contend that an individual's background knowledge profoundly influences the way texts are comprehended and the things he or she learns from educational experiences.[19] This presents particular challenges for studying history. One's experiences create the lens through which he or she understands history—a lens that is shaped and colored by current world conditions, personal interests, and modern values. Thus, any interpretation of the past, including that developed by historians, history teachers, and history students, is heavily influenced by present conditions. Third, socio-cultural theorists suggest that learning is facilitated through nurturing social interactions. Vygotsky argued that learning takes place within a "zone of proximal development (ZPD)," which includes activities that an individual can only accomplish with social support. A more experienced person (e.g., a parent, teacher, big sister) provides temporary support, labeled "scaffolding," and gradually removes support as the learner gains the ability to engage in an activity independently. Thus, a history teacher must design activities within the students' ZPD and gradually remove scaffolding as students become increasingly proficient.

The body of research on teaching students to read like historians rests on two assumptions. First, engaging young people in historical thinking is developmentally appropriate. In other words, adolescents, and even young children, have the cognitive capacity to engage in historical inquiry. Historical thinking is not beyond students' ZPD when the proper forms of scaffolding are provided. This assumption is supported by a growing body of research that suggests that children as young as 5th grade and even kindergarten are able to begin to think in historically appropriate ways when they receive supportive instruction.[20] As Ashby, Lee, and Shemilt contend, "Students need not wait until they reach a certain grade to benefit from trying to weigh the evidence."[21] Second, teaching young people how to engage in historical thinking is an appropriate goal of history teaching. There is room within the teaching of the substance of history for the teaching of the processes of history. This idea is promoted by the national standards for history teaching[22] and is supported by a growing number of researchers.[23] It should be clarified that researchers are not deluded into thinking that their work will result in students becoming "mini-historians" with all of the sophisticated tools that historians possess. But, as Lee states, "developing students' understanding of history is worthwhile without implying any grandiose claims."[24]

Because researchers use a variety of constructs in describing historical

reading, several terms should be clearly defined. For purposes of this paper, *texts* will be defined broadly to include any representational resource[25] or object that historians, history teachers, or students intentionally imbue with meaning for purposes of constructing historical understanding.[26] Written evidence is most valued in historical inquiry, but any other form of historical evidence is considered text. *Literacy* is defined as the ability to construct meaning with, use, and create texts in discipline appropriate ways.[27] It involves the ability to comprehend, use, and critique texts.[28] Since the majority of texts that historians use are traditional print texts, the words literacy and *reading* are used interchangeably in this paper. Being literate involves multiple *literacies*, or abilities to decode and comprehend various formats of texts using varied techniques. These techniques include *strategies*, intentionally employed cognitive steps that facilitate literate engagement with texts; *heuristics*, habits of mind and rules of thumb, less structured than strategies but used for the same purposes; and *skills*, strategies that are employed without conscious thought.[29] Techniques that are often heuristics for historians may become strategies for students as teachers formalize thinking processes and break heuristics down into stages or steps. It should be noted that instructional strategies—teachers' methods of teaching—are a construct quite different from the cognitive strategies, heuristics, and skills that readers employ in working with texts.[30] In this paper, instructional strategies are referred to as *interventions* to avoid confusion. Finally, the term *adolescent* refers to young people, particularly in history educational settings, from upper elementary grades through undergraduates—individuals who have been the primary focus of research on teaching students to read like historians.

A synthesis of the research on students' efforts to read like historians reveals patterns that are consistent across upper elementary through advanced high school and undergraduate students. These patterns suggest that there are at least four barriers to students' ability to read like historians: 1) analyzing historical documents taxes students' cognitive resources beyond their bounds; 2) students have limited historical background knowledge and misapply the background knowledge they have; 3) students tend to hold unsophisticated views of the world; and 4) students have a false sense of what it means to study history. Each of these notions will be discussed along with instructional interventions that may help students overcome each barrier (see Figure 1).

Barrier 1: High Demands on Students' Cognitive Resources

Wineburg contends "historical thinking, in its deepest forms, is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from

psychological development. Its achievement…actually goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think."[31] Historical thinking is cognitively challenging. The difficulty of reading primary sources stems, in part, from unfamiliar vocabulary, historical changes in writing conventions, sloppily written or age-damaged documents, the evolving meanings of words, and unfamiliarity with the context of a document's creation. For many students, comprehending the literal meaning of a historical text is a major achievement. When comprehension consumes students' limited working memory, there are few cognitive resources left for demanding tasks such as analyzing the source of the text or corroborating information across texts.[32] This may account for why students often take information in texts at face value rather than think critically about the information; literal comprehension exhausts working memory. This may also account for why students tend to appreciate textbook accounts,[33] which are typically written near the students' reading level using modern vocabulary and familiar writing conventions.

The difficulty of engaging in historical analysis increases when students are asked to employ new strategies or heuristics, such as sourcing, or corroboration. Historians use these heuristics with little conscious effort. But when strategies are first introduced to students, it takes awareness and effort to employ them, which further taxes students' limited working memory.[34] For example, when the strategy of sourcing is new to students, it remains the focus of their attention. Students may have to work to remember what to think about when sourcing (e.g., what type of document they are reading, who the author was, how the author was involved in the activity, when the document was produced, who the intended audience was, and what the author's potential biases might have been) as well as to engage in the actual sourcing. Focusing on these questions might detract from their ability to comprehend the document rather than facilitate their comprehension. Students' cognitive processes are different from historians, who automatically seek answers to these questions without focusing conscious attention on the questions.

In addition, historical analysis involves the synthesis of information from multiple texts. Historians instinctively corroborate information across texts looking for similarities and differences. Students who may struggle to analyze the content of a single text are unlikely to have the cognitive resources to synthesize information across multiple sources. This might account for why the high school students in Stahl et al.'s study[35] and the undergraduates in Perfetti, Britt, and Georgi's study[36] clung to their initial understanding of an event, which they developed as they read the first few texts, in spite of contradictory information that they were exposed to in subsequent texts. In the face of these three challenges—comprehending

difficult texts, using new and unfamiliar strategies, and synthesizing information from multiple texts—students may not possess the cognitive resources that are needed to engage in deep historical analysis.

What can history teachers do to overcome the cognitive barriers that students face in engaging in historical analysis with multiple documents? The following research-based instructional interventions can be used to a) eliminate comprehension of texts as a barrier to deep historical analysis, b) help students become familiar with strategies and eventually employ them automatically, and c) provide scaffolding as students work with multiple texts.

Eliminating Comprehension Problems as a Barrier

There are several measures that can be taken to help students comprehend the historical texts to which they are exposed. The simplest instructional intervention is to choose texts that are easy to comprehend. When possible, teachers should select texts that are written at or below students' reading level.[37] Use of simple texts, when available, can allow students to devote their working memory to strategy use and analysis rather than to basic decoding (i.e., recognizing letters and forming words and sentences) and comprehension (i.e., understanding the literal meaning). As students' ability to engage in historical analysis increases, the difficulty level of texts can gradually increase.

There are several other measures that teachers can take to support students' comprehension of difficult documents. Teachers should pre-teach unfamiliar vocabulary. For example, at the website www.historicalthinkingmatters.com, a collection of instructional resources that promote historical analysis, web designers include a list of difficult vocabulary at the side of each document with the note, "These definitions should help with reading comprehension."[38] Documents that are difficult to read because of the author's penmanship should be accompanied by legible transcriptions so that students can easily read the words. This is not to suggest that students should never experience the process of attempting to decipher the words from an original manuscript, an exciting part of historical research. Instead, it is a reminder to teachers that students who must work hard to decode a barely-legible text will have fewer cognitive resources remaining with which to think deeply about it. Translating old English documents into modern English, and giving students brief, carefully selected excerpts rather than long original documents, facilitated the historical thinking of 6th grade students in a study conducted by Ashby, Lee, and Shemilt.[39]

To aid students in comprehending challenging texts, the teacher can have them work in reciprocal teaching groups, an instructional intervention that has been shown to improve students' comprehension in a variety

of settings.[40]   In reciprocal teaching, a student leads a group of peers as they read out loud a passage from a text and then work together to clarify, summarize, ask and answer questions, and make predictions. The group then moves to the next passage of the text and repeats the process, continuing until the entire text has been read and discussed. Interaction between students, a powerful form of scaffolding, helps them become more active in the reading process and increases the likelihood that the literal meaning of a text will be comprehended. To summarize, with support for basic comprehension, students are more likely to have available working memory with which to engage in the higher order thinking of historical analysis and interpretation.

Helping Students Become Familiar with Historians' Heuristics

   As mentioned, when students focus conscious attention on reading strategies, they have fewer cognitive resources to employ in higher order thinking.[41] Teachers, then, must provide significant support for students when strategies are new so that students' working memory is not overloaded. There are several things teachers can do to provide scaffolding. A teacher can give students reminders about strategy procedures on bookmarks or posters. For instance, in VanSledright's study of 5th graders, he placed a poster in the classroom that listed steps for students' historical inquiry: "dig up evidence, check sources, check the reliability of the sources, judge the importance of each piece of evidence, build an idea of what happened, and make an argument for what happened."[42] Each of these steps was further broken down into questions students should consider. A glance at a poster or bookmark can eliminate the need to use working memory to recall procedures.

   Teachers could also prepare study guides or graphic organizers that provide a place for students to record their thought processes. For example, Levstick and Barton observed a kindergarten teacher who facilitated corroboration across three children's books about Columbus by creating a chart that made direct comparisons. The five and six year olds dictated to her as she filled out the chart. The graphic organizer helped students realize that "books on the same subject can give you different information."[43] Study guides remind students about strategies and free up working memory by allowing students to refer back to their written record as needed.

   In addition, when strategies are new, a teacher should model the desired thought processes for students. For example, VanSledright demonstrated corroboration and sourcing in his analysis of the "starving time" with 5th grade students. During analysis, he reflected aloud: "We have conflicting clues. One says the Powhatans were friendly and brought corn. John Smith said that…Another document said there was an Indian war with

the settlers that kept them from getting their food. So which was it?"[44] Over time, his 5th grade students began to talk about documents using the same type of language.

Additionally, students need numerous, regular opportunities to engage in historical reasoning so that strategies become automatic and attention can be shifted from engaging in strategies to constructing evidence-based interpretations of events. As students begin to demonstrate competence in strategic thinking, teachers should remove the scaffolding (e.g., take down posters, make students create their own graphic organizers), allowing students to become more independent. Teachers must never lose sight of the goal, which is not students' use of strategies, but students' independent ability to engage in sophisticated historical reading, reasoning, and communicating.[45]

Research on the teaching of historians' heuristics to students creates optimism. Studies have shown that students begin to use sourcing independently after a few exposures to a computer program that explicitly teaches about sourcing,[46] or through classroom lessons on sourcing and corroboration with opportunities for practice.[47] Strategies may become second nature for many students who experience classrooms that regularly discuss historical reasoning and provide numerous opportunities to work with primary source documents, particularly when this type of instruction is given year after year.[48] When students begin to use heuristics automatically, without conscious effort, working memory becomes available for deeper historical analysis.

Providing Scaffolding for Students Work with Multiple Texts

Historical reading and reasoning further taxes students' cognitive capacities by requiring them to construct an understanding from multiple texts. Several instructional interventions have been developed that provide support for students as they work with multiple, fragmentary, contradictory texts. Manderino developed an approach that encouraged students to synthesize information across multiple texts.[49] Students read a text and wrote a brief summary. They read a second text and wrote a summary that synthesized information from both texts. This process of reading a new text and writing progressively longer and more complex summaries continued through a series of documents, culminating in the writing of a summary that was intended to synthesize across all of the texts.

In a similar instructional strategy, called the evolving concept lesson model,[50] students were given a graphic organizer with a place to record source information and independent summaries of multiple texts. Students worked together to list similarities and differences between the content of each text. The students were also given a place to record their opinion on

a controversial topic after reading each text, and were allowed to change their opinion as their understanding of the event evolved. The record that students kept on the study guide allowed them to move back and forth between the documents and to observe their evolving interpretation of the event. In a study of adult high school students who used the evolving concept graphic organizer, students regularly wrote comments that revealed sourcing and corroboration.[51]

The Inquiry Chart (I-Chart) is another instructional method intended to support students' analysis of multiple texts.[52] The I-Chart is a matrix that provides a place for students to record the characteristics and content of multiple resources that are related to an inquiry topic. This chart facilitates direct comparisons across texts. In summary, the common features of instructional interventions that have been shown to help students work with multiple texts are a) the inclusion of a study guide that allows students to keep a written record of each document, b) opportunities to reflect on each document independently and in connection with other texts, and c) interaction with peers or the teacher as understanding is constructed. These three elements provide scaffolding that supports students' engagement in the difficult process of constructing an understanding of an event from multiple historical documents.

Barrier 2: Limited or Misapplied Background Knowledge

As historians study documents, they place themselves in the context of the document's creation.[53] They are able to imagine the physical, social, historical, and linguistic context of the production of the document. This contextualization helps them comprehend and interpret a document's content. Contextualization often requires a great deal of background knowledge about the geography, time period, personalities, values, and trends of the era being studied. For example, when considering a document about the Battle of Lexington, one historian, demonstrating a knowledge of the clothing of the period, remarked that the British soldiers, who were reported to have waded through a stream up to their middles, would have been wearing wool uniforms that would have remained damp and itchy throughout their march.[54]

In their development of a framework for considering historical reasoning, Van Drie and Van Boxtel suggest that contextualization poses a particular challenge for students.[55] Indeed, a growing body of research supports this contention. For example, Nokes, Dole, and Hacker,[56] who provided similar lessons on sourcing, corroboration, and contextualization, found improvement in students' sourcing and corroboration, but not contextualization. They hypothesized that students' limited background

knowledge prevented them from engaging in contextualization. Stated simply, students did not know about the physical or social context of the time periods they were studying, and contextualization was unlikely without this background knowledge. Within the growing body of research on students' reading in history classes, there is nothing as troubling as teachers' inability to satisfactorily build students' contextualization skills. Students' failure to engage in contextualization is troublesome in light of the fact that it is one of the heuristics that is fundamental in historians' ability to make sense of documents.[57] VanSledright suggests that, "because historical contextualization is so highly prized within communities of historians, it must not be neglected [in our work with students]."[58]

A related problem is students' misapplication of background knowledge. As mentioned, educational researchers have found that individuals construct an understanding of the world in light of what they already know.[59] Background knowledge plays an important role in the way readers construct meaning with texts,[60] and perceive the world around them.[61] Adolescents' modern world is often drastically different from that of the time periods that they study in history classes. Viewing the past through the lens of the present often results in the misinterpretation of historical events, a phenomenon that Wineburg called "presentism."[62] VanSledright's book, *In Search of America's Past*, documents his efforts to build 5th grade students' ability to engage in historical reasoning without presentism. In the end, he experiences mixed results, lamenting, "the act of checking our historical positionalities at the door and thus limiting the way we imposed them was impossible."[63] Presentism interferes with contextualization by causing students to make inappropriate inferences about the motives and actions of individuals who lived in conditions very different from modern times.

For example, in a study of high school students' analysis of two movies that depicted historical eras, Seixas found that students mistakenly thought that the movie that showed characters thinking and reacting as the students would was considered by them to be more "realistic."[64] Students failed to consider that people removed from them in time and place might make decisions based on different standards. In other research, students have demonstrated a "deficit view of the past," considering historical people unreasonable and unintelligent because their actions—such as the Anglo Saxons' trial by ordeal—do not make sense using modern standards.[65] Thus, the problem with background knowledge is two-fold: a) students lack the rich background knowledge of historical eras that may be necessary to engage in contextualization; and b) students inappropriately apply their background knowledge of the present to interpret the events of the past. How can teachers remove these barriers to students' historical reasoning?

Enriching Students' Historical Background Knowledge

Materials that are commonly used in history classrooms do not facilitate the development of extensive background knowledge. Textbooks, which provide few details of any single event, do not enrich students' background knowledge sufficiently for them to appreciate the foreignness of past times and distant places. Teachers can supplement or replace textbooks with detail-rich historical fiction and primary source materials. Advocates of the use of historical fiction contend that it promotes historical empathy and perspective taking,[66] concepts that are closely related to contextualization. Well-researched and well-written, detail-rich historical fiction may create a better understanding of the geography, culture, values, fashions, and trends that are the settings for historical events.[67] The use of historical fiction also presents history teachers with opportunities to explicitly teach students about the differences between genres of writing, knowledge that is essential in sourcing. It should be noted, however, that little empirical research has been published showing the effects of historical fiction on secondary students' ability to engage in contextualization.

Additionally, the traditional history curriculum in secondary schools favors the superficial coverage of many topics rather than in-depth coverage of few topics. History teachers feel pressure to "cover the core."[68] One way to satisfy the core curriculum requirements and allow for in-depth study is by using case studies that illustrate important historical concepts—using "very small amounts of content to tackle big ideas."[69] For example, at historicalthinkingmatters.org, resources are available to conduct in-depth study of several significant and illustrative events, such as the "Scopes Monkey Trial," the 1926 trial of a science teacher who violated a Tennessee ordinance that prohibited the teaching of evolution in public schools.[70] The website provides students with numerous primary sources related to this event, which represents the clash between tradition and change, a historical theme of the 1920s and a concept that is repeated throughout history. Instructional materials and methods, like those available on this website, enrich students' background knowledge by immersing them in historical contexts where foreign values and lifestyles can be explored. Primary source accounts provide glimpses into the language, values, and worlds of the past. With significant support, students may begin to view the past on its own terms by engaging in contextualization.

Helping Students Overcome Presentism

Research has shown that students enter history classrooms with prior conceptions and misconceptions, none of which is more threatening to historical reasoning than the tendency to project today's value, culture, and world on the past. One way teachers can combat this tendency is to

engage students in discussions that explicitly promote historical empathy, the ability to see the world through the eyes of historical people. For instance, in an analysis of the Pilgrims' settlement of Plymouth, some students were able to show signs of historical empathy during a discussion that developed in response to the teacher's question, "Think about the distinction between the way in which the Pilgrim Fathers would have explained what was happening and the way in which we might."[71]

Additionally, teachers can prepare refutational texts that directly challenge students' assumptions about the past as has been done to confront misconceptions in other fields, most notably science.[72] These texts could explicitly teach how concepts that young people take for granted, such as modern rules of warfare, paper as a medium for writing, or modern American courtship rituals, are very different than those things have been in the past. Research has shown that refutational texts in the field of science are successful in helping individuals overcome the stubborn misconceptions that resist change when more traditional texts are used.[73] Future studies may reveal that refutational texts in history help students overcome the tendency to project today's culture and values on the people of the past, an important prerequisite for contextualization and engaging in deep historical analysis.

Barrier 3: Unsophisticated Worldviews

Adolescents' often exhibit unsophisticated worldviews. Four tendencies in particular may pose barriers to students' reading like historians. The first is adolescents' inclination toward dualism. Students have a tendency to view the world in absolutes of good or bad, viewing questions as having one right answer and problems having one correct solution.[74] For example, 4th graders, in working with historical sources related to St. Brendan's discovery of America, classified texts as fiction or nonfiction, failing to comprehend that a text that contains inaccuracies might still be helpful in constructing an understanding of the past.[75] In a discipline where beauty is found in various hues, students tend to see only black or white.

Additionally, students have a tendency to engage in intellectual reductionism, replacing historical complexity with oversimplification. For example, Barton discovered that students often adopt simplistic notions of historical agency.[76] He found that New Zealand students commonly made statements such as "New Zealand feared Japan" when discussing World War II. After being asked some probing questions, students began to realize that they did not know what they meant by this statement. Who, exactly, was this New Zealand who feared Japan? Can a nation really experience human emotions such as fear? Barton found that students'

language repeatedly demonstrated a distorted view of agency by describing individuals' actions as a nation's. In a different study, Barton found that students failed to make a distinction between long-term trends and events or individual actions.[77] Students also have a tendency to lump people from the past into broad categories regardless of their uniqueness or distance from specific events.[78] For example, students might consider Native Americans as a single group, failing to consider drastic differences in culture, the changing conditions within a Native American group over time, or differences between individuals within a culture. A student might fail to make a distinction between the Native Americans that interacted with Puritans in 17th-century New England, and those that resisted resettlement on the 19th-century Great Plains. Researchers have concluded that students inappropriately employ universalized rather than contextualized thinking, ignoring some of the significant yet subtle distinctions in historical interpretations. Oversimplification in issues of agency, and failure to make distinctions between trends and events are a few examples of students' reductionist thinking.

A third tendency of secondary history students is toward authoritarianism, or an uncritical dependence on authority for their understanding of the past. One of the great ironies of history classrooms is that secondary students, who by nature tend to resist authority, often willingly submit to their teachers' and textbooks' historical interpretations without question. As described above, research has shown that history students place great confidence in objective sounding textbooks.[79] They uncritically accept the information in the documents that they read.[80] They do not filter the information they find on bogus websites.[81] For example, in Wineburg's study, a gifted high school student who proved to be a very skilled reader found a poorly written textbook account to be more appealing to him than eye-witness accounts.[82] When asked why, he suggested that the bias in the eye-witness accounts made them less trustworthy and that the textbook simply presented the facts without bias. This student was not unique. In fact, almost all of the students in Wineburg's study rated the textbook as one of the most reliable of several sources. Interestingly, historians who looked at the same collection of texts rated the textbook as one of the least reliable. In sum, most secondary students cower under the authority of the teacher and textbook, accepting the information transmitted through lecture or reading without critical thought.

Fourth, secondary students take a positivist epistemological stance, a theory of knowledge that suggests that humans can perceive an objective reality. Positivism is based on the belief that perceptions are value-free, an idea that conflicts with the work of historians who recognize that different individuals can perceive the same event differently and, as a result, often

leave drastically different accounts. Historians, keeping in mind the point of view and biases of authors, use imperfect accounts to develop historical interpretations. On the other hand, students face contradictory accounts with frustration,[83] or with unsophisticated explanations. For example, 5th grade students in VanSledright's research classroom had a simple explanation for differences in accounts of Jamestown's "starving time." They concluded that all of the individuals whose accounts disagreed with the source that they thought was truthful were deliberately lying.[84] Students failed to recognize that subtle differences in context and individual biases sometimes result in contradictory, though, from differing perspectives, accurate accounts. There is some indication that even older students approach history with a positivist point of view. Hynd, Holschuh, and Hubbard[85] found that undergraduate students tended to view the world from a positivist perspective prior to a course on historical reasoning. Thus, positivism becomes a barrier for young and old students alike when working with multiple conflicting documents.

Interestingly, when students' positivist stance is questioned, they sometimes resort to "vicious relativism."[86] Lee describes students, when exposed to the notion of historical interpretation, throwing their hands up in frustration and developing the attitude that since people view the world from different perspectives, each individual is entitled to his or her own interpretation of history, all equally valid. Since the past cannot be reconstructed with exact certainty, any interpretation of it must be accepted. The students he worked with struggled to understand that not all opinions are acceptable, but that historical interpretations must be substantiated by the skillful use of evidence.[87]

Students' unsophisticated worldviews of dualism, reductionism, authoritarianism, and positivism or vicious relativism, can be confronted by a) including controversies in history curriculum, b) admitting historical uncertainty, c) and reconsidering the types of assessments that are used in history classrooms.

Including Historical Controversies

Levstick and Barton argue that "the desire to avoid controversy leads to one of the most serious weaknesses in the discussion of history—the refusal to admit that all history is interpretive."[88] History is full of controversies, about which historians disagree. However, the history that is often presented to students through textbook narratives and lectures is void of the kinds of controversies that are central in historical inquiry.[89] Students are typically given a straight-forward list of facts to be remembered. Is it any wonder that popular culture mocks history classrooms as being extremely boring,[90] or that interaction with students reveals that history, as it is tra-

ditionally taught, tends to be one of the least interesting subjects?[91] On the other hand, Ashby and his colleagues found that students' interest increased when they worked with multiple primary sources, concluding that "in grappling with the sources, they acquired a vested interest in knowing."[92]

Including controversy in history classrooms not only increases interest,[93] but is likely to confront students' unsophisticated views of the world. The teacher's seeming omniscience as content authority is eliminated when he or she introduces a controversial historical interpretation without advocating a side and allows students to develop their own evidence-based interpretations. It should be pointed out that students, when faced with a controversy, may still perceive the answer in simplistic, dualistic terms. For example, students considering whether St. Brendan, an Irish monk, landed in America centuries before Columbus originally either believed he had or had not. Over time, and after exposure to multiple primary and secondary sources, they began to view the controversy in more complex terms, considering alternative interpretations and demonstrating an ability to make sense of the evidence in more sophisticated ways.[94] The keys to success in this instance seemed to be students' exposure to multiple pieces of evidence, the teacher devoting adequate instructional time to thoroughly explore the issues involved in analyzing evidence, and the teacher carefully guiding students' work through questioning and the timing of when new evidence was introduced.

Admitting Uncertainty

"The historical record is more often incomplete than contradictory."[95] Historians are often required, by a lack of evidence, to fill in gaps in the record with reasoned speculation. Historians acknowledge the tentative nature of historical interpretations and are willing to update understandings as new evidence surfaces or as old evidence is understood in new ways. One of the worst flaws of history textbooks is that they often present speculation and interpretations of events as if they were facts.[96] Paxton conducted a study of students' processing of revised textbook accounts that included admissions of uncertainty and other rhetorical devices that made the textbook author more visible. He found that students were more active readers when studying revised texts.[97] Other researchers have found similar tendencies—the objective sounding, authoritative voice of textbooks encourages an uncritical submission to content authorities.[98] Textbooks and teachers often form an authoritative frontline that students cannot breach. Teachers can help break down this barrier by admitting uncertainty, by pointing out to students when textbooks include theories or hypotheses presented as objective facts, by providing conflicting sources of information, and by teaching students to "question the author" of various texts.[99]

Additionally, teachers, through Socratic dialogue surrounding texts, can help students realize when they are missing important information in the development of historical interpretations. Ashby and his colleagues recommend that teachers not provide too much evidence too soon. Instead, they suggest that teachers interrogate students concerning their text-based interpretations, help students recognize the need for more evidence, and then help students gather the evidence that is needed to develop greater certainty.[100] By admitting uncertainty, and by helping students acknowledge their own uncertainties, teachers can help students understand that the writing of history is a work in progress.

Reconsidering Assessments

Changes in classroom practice are unlikely to fully confront dualism, intellectual reductionism, authoritarianism, positivism, or vicious relativism if teachers exclusively use traditional assessments that measure students' factual knowledge. Traditional tests give the impression that learning history is a matter of remembering facts, that the teacher and course materials are unquestionable authorities, and that there is always a single correct answer. Instead, teachers should assess students' understanding of events through open-ended questions that allow expressions of substantiated opinions. This type of speaking and writing more accurately reflects the work of historians as they develop a hypothesis and marshal evidence. One such assessment, the document based question (DBQ) on advanced placement tests, provides students with a number of documents related to a historical event or era and asks them to respond to an open-ended question using the documents and their knowledge of the period. Such assessments show students that multiple theories can be developed from the same body of historical evidence and require them to independently construct an interpretation. Repeated practice writing DBQ essays over the course of a school year has been shown to improve students' ability to read, think, and write like historians.[101] When traditional assessments are used, the teacher should allow students to defend an answer orally or in writing, with the expectation that students will include historical evidence to support their opinion. In summary, the materials that a teacher uses, and the way he or she teaches, talks, and assesses can help students overcome the unsophisticated worldviews of dualism, reductionism, authoritarianism, and positivism/relativism, which form a barrier to students' reading like historians.

Barrier 4: A False Sense of the Discipline of History

History, as it has traditionally been taught, is unique among all other

secondary subject areas in the disparity between the behaviors of those who are in the field—historians—and those who are in the classroom—history students. In most other content areas, students have some exposure to the processes used to engage in inquiry within that field. For example, science students engage in the scientific method in science labs where they have the opportunity to develop and test hypotheses through experimentation. Industrial arts students design and build things.   Physical education students run drills and compete in athletic games. Even in math classes, students engage in constructing proofs and are immersed in the symbols and structure of the discipline. However, history students rarely have the opportunity to engage in historical inquiry. Historians produce history and history students consume history, typically with very little thought about how it was produced.[102]

History students often view history as "the past" rather than as interpretations of the past.[103] They fail to recognize that the production of any historical narrative, including textbooks, includes decisions about where to start and end, what to include and omit, how to interpret events, and whose perspective to take.[104] For example, what is commonly referred to as western expansion could as accurately be described as eastern encroachment from a different point of view.

Traditional methods and materials give the impression that learning history is a matter of remembering information that teachers, textbooks, and documentary movies transmit. The prevalence of lecture, textbook reading, and recall examinations gives students the impression that historical study involves listening, passive reading, and memorizing. The story of history, especially the way it appears in textbooks, is presented in a matter-of-fact way that leaves little room for personal interpretation by the students or even the teacher.[105] Through years of history classes, students have often been conditioned to check their curiosity at the door of the classroom and submit without resistance to the information they hear in class.[106] How different this is from the way historians study the past. Historians question every source, accept nothing at face value, marshal evidence to support every claim, and recognize the personal biases that shape and give life to historical ideas.[107] They are active participants in not only the learning of history, but in its very creation.

Thus, students' false sense of the nature of the discipline of history includes at least four misconceptions. First, students do not have an accurate conception of the work of historians, viewing them as archivists rather than constructors of historical meaning.[108] Second, they believe that historical understanding is transmitted rather than constructed.[109] They fail to recognize the distinction between history and the past—that history is not the past, but individuals' interpretations of the past.[110] Third, students

believe that historical thinking is passive rather than active. Instead of viewing their role as one of questioning, interpreting, hypothesizing, and supporting a point of view, they view their role as one of listening, reading, and remembering. Fourth, students fail to understand that the multiple perspectives from which individuals perceive the world create many versions of history, all competing for acceptance. Students are accustomed to the textbook narrative and the teacher version, which might be very similar. Overexposure to this rendering of history may convince them that it *is* history. They fail to consider the many other interpretations of events or to recognize that multiple interpretations even exist. They do not know that individuals are allowed to question the official history to which they are exposed.[111] Nor do they notice that some groups' narratives are missing completely from the school curriculum. However, there are several things a history teacher can do to help students understand the nature of history, including several suggestions made above that will be revisited.

Non-traditional Instructional Methods

Secondary history classrooms are dominated by lecture, textbook readings, or other instructional "activities" that are intended to transmit information to students.[112] Instead, teachers should regularly use activities that encourage students to build their own understanding of the past. Such activities should allow opportunities for students to disagree, debate, and discuss historical controversy. In addition, teachers should provide opportunities for students to become more active when traditional types of activities are used. As mentioned above, McKeown, Beck, and Worthy taught students to "question the author" when reading textbook passages.[113] Students were encouraged to imagine an interaction with the author and to determine how successful the author had been in helping them understand the content of the text. As students reached for the author's ideas, they became more active in the construction of meaning. Other instructional interventions such as cooperative learning and reciprocal teaching[114] can promote a more active engagement with historical ideas, more accurately reflecting the active nature of historical analysis.

In addition, history teachers should give students the opportunity to engage in authentic historical inquiry. Students should be allowed to pursue their own historical questions and conduct original research. Often this work involves personal, family, or local historical topics. Secondary students have made a significant contribution to historical understanding by exploring original topics. For example, few people knew the story of Irena Sendlerowa, a Polish Catholic social worker who rescued hundreds of Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942, before four high school students, encouraged by their history teacher, researched Sendlerowa's life

and wrote a play about her as part of the National History Day competition. Today Sendlerowa is well-known, even being nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 2007, in large part because of the original work of these secondary students.[115]

In order to engage in original inquiry projects such as this, history teachers must also include strategy instruction in their classrooms. The work of historians must be talked about explicitly. Discussions of historians' work has been found to increase students' ability to think like historians.[116] In addition and as described above, numerous other studies have found that students begin to use historians' strategies when they are explicitly taught how to do so.[117] As Stahl and Shanahan suggest, history instruction should not include simply the narrative of history but instruction on how historical inquiry takes place.[118] It should include not just the story of history, but how it is written. And students must be given a voice in writing it.

Non-traditional Instructional Materials

Students are unlikely to develop an accurate understanding of the nature of the discipline of history unless they work with the kinds of texts with which historians work—primary source documents, artifacts, and secondary sources that contain controversial interpretations. In a series of studies, Wiley and Voss found that students read historical documents differently than they read textbook accounts.[119] Students instinctively became more critical. In support of these results, Nokes, Dole, and Hacker found that explicit instruction on historians' heuristics was only effective when students worked with multiple historical documents rather than the textbook.[120] Thus, one of the keys to overcoming students' false sense of the discipline of history is exposure to multiple historical texts on a regular basis. This is not to say that the textbook has no place in a history classroom. Instead, the textbook should be considered *a* source rather than *the* source of information,[121] subject to the same critical review as any other source.

Conclusions

History provides an appropriate context for the teaching of historical reading and reasoning—the type of thinking that historians employ. However, such thinking is not natural to students. There are several barriers to students' reading like historians. Research is helping identify these barriers as well as means of potentially overcoming them. Figure 1 summarizes the barriers to historical literacy that have been identified by current research. It lists research-supported instructional interventions that

Barrier	Causes	Possible Instructional Interventions
High demands on students' cognitive resources	• Basic comprehension challenges	• Choose simple texts • Preteach vocabulary • Adapt texts to fit students' levels • Provide legible transcripts • Form reciprocal teaching groups
	• Unfamiliarity with historians' heuristics	• Provide reminders through posters/bookmarks • Provide graphic organizers • Model thinking processes • Allow repeated practice
	• The challenge of synthesizing across multiple texts	• Provide graphic organizers • Allow students to reflect on each text independently and in connection with other texts • Allow group analysis
Limited or misapplied background knowledge	• Limited background knowledge	• Supplement textbooks with detail-rich historical fiction • Provide primary sources • Immerse students in illustrative case studies
	• Misapplied background knowledge	• Explicitly teach historical empathy • Use refutational texts that confront assumptions
Simplistic views of the world	• Dualism, intellectual reductionism, authoritarianism, positivism or vicious relativism	• Include controversies • Encourage independent, evidenced-based interpretations • Admit uncertainty • Model tentative acceptance of interpretations • Redesign assessments
A false sense of the discipline of history	• Misunderstandings of the role of historians	• Give explicit instruction on the work of historians
	• View history as transmitted rather than actively constructed	• Engage students in history labs • Encourage students to conduct authentic historical inquiries
	• Accept the official textbook narrative as the only narrative	• Provide alternative sources from multiple perspectives • Use the textbook as one of many sources, subject to critique

Figure 1: *Barriers to Historical Reading, Causes of Barriers, and Possible Instructional Interventions*

address these barriers. Future research may shed further light on what can be done to overcome these barriers and help students read like historians, a noble goal for educators.

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