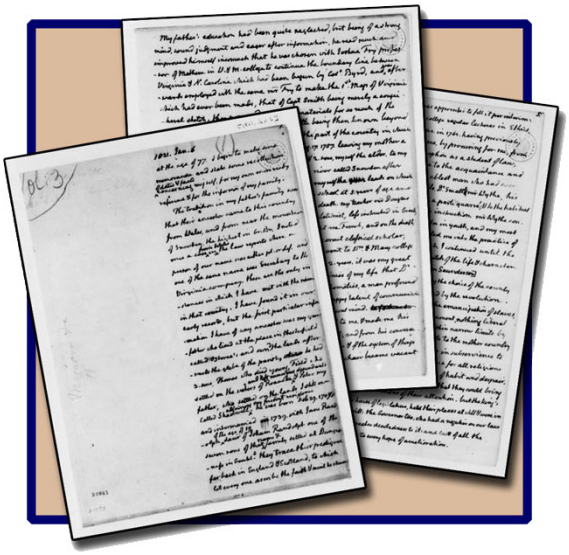
Reading Comprehension and Historical Thinking: Classroom Realities in Building a Context Connection

Which comes first with a primary text source, historical thinking or reading comprehension? Clearly, for students to understand and think historically when reading a source document, they must be able to comprehend what they read. To assume, however, that there is a single monolithic model for improving students' reading comprehension across all subjects would be… incorrect. Acquiring domain-specific knowledge from what we read requires more than mere literal comprehension of the words in a document—it involves thinking and reasoning in a way that is often particular to the domain or subject addressed in the reading. Pre-eminent historian Sam Wineburg (2001), among others, argues that historical thinking—the central goal of studying history, whether directed toward construction of contexts, critical analysis of documents in terms of contexts, or context-sensitive judgments of behavior—is neglected by the use of traditional reading strategies that simply emphasize literal interpretation and comprehension. That is not to say we should not use the opportunity of reading historical narrative to help students improve their comprehension skills. Quite the contrary.



Would you want your students to be able to read this?

Thomas Jefferson, July 27, 1821, Autobiography Draft Fragment, January 6 through July 27 (scans of the first few pages)

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In search of historical thinking through text comprehension

Wineburg goes further to advocate the use of the sourcing heuristic before beginning to read for comprehension, so that students can understand the document as a source in a specific context. His claim is supported by the past research of his language arts counterparts on effect of *prior knowledge* on comprehension,

Historians engage in the **sourcing heuristic** by trying to establish a non-biased context in which to examine a primary source. They ask questions about an author's purpose, motivation, and reliability in terms of their knowledge and proximity to events at the time a document was written.

by using the familiar through such activities as comparing story characters or events with those in their own lives (see Using the Familiar to Introduce Students to the Study of Primary and Secondary Sources and the student activity "I Left a Trace" at http://www.designedinstruction.com/learningleads/teacher-support-traces.html) as well as general schema theory (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Athey, 1983; Harris & Hodges, 1995). Reviews of similar findings (National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000) regarding the value of context-based approaches for improving reading comprehension have uncovered 14 different highly reliable studies that demonstrate empirical evidence supporting the value of prior instruction across a variety of strategies and with a number of related effects on comprehension—all, however, pointing toward improvement in students' abilities to elaborate on what is being read, draw inferences based on available information, and recall and use information at a later time.

Historians engage the **corroboration heuristic** by comparing information obtained from several documents. Through cross-indexing source documents and artifacts, we can note corroboration among primary sources as well as among historians' interpretations of these sources over time—through second- and third-order documents.

Taking a leap forward into how this might translate into classroom practice from the historian perspective, Nelson & Drake (2001) suggest that analysis guides that are useful in introducing the sourcing heuristic prior to reading can also remain effective tools for cultivating historical thinking throughout the course of working with certain documents. As when historians read documents, students can likewise learn to give due attention to the corroboration heuristic (e.g., drawing relationships and testing sources against other sources to measure validity), as well as contextualization within a time and place and comparison to conditions and events in other parts of the world at the time the document was created. This is compelling. Though reading theorists concur that there is indeed a distinction between literacy development as reading instruction and literacy development to support subject matter learning (Alvermann & Phelps, 1994; Ruddell, 2001), and that the development of reading comprehension skills is directly impacted by a reader's existing preparation and understanding of the subject matter (Anderson, 1984; NRP, 2000; Steffensen, Joag-Dev, & Anderson, 1979), Nelson & Drake's suggestion carries with it the implicit notion that we should structure students' *ongoing* learning experiences in a way that maximizes the positive impact of dual efforts toward "reading to learn" and "learning to read." If we need further rationale for the worth of capturing this natural symbiotic relationship, we have only to turn to our own "history" of devaluation of domain-specific historical learning in classrooms. It's not new, especially at the elementary level (Ravitch, 1987), and the omission of history testing in *No Child Left Behind* only exacerbates the dilemma (Ungurait, 2003). Regardless of our views, we can and should seek better ways of accomplishing our goals. Finding solutions that integrate history into comprehensive school programs that place emphasis on reading in only one such possibility.

In the language arts and reading comprehension community, there is a substantial theory and literature base surrounding the positive aspects of before/during/after reading techniques (Brown, Armbruster, & Baker, 1983; Taylor & Frye, 1992; Tei & Stewart, 1985). These are often called "fix-up" strategies. More recently we are seeing the emergence of a far more robust set of research evidence findings that outline these

strategies and the situations, age ranges, and reading comprehension purposes for which they have been found to be most successful. A number of these effectively promote interpretive and critical reading skills—inferring main ideas and cause-and-effect relationships that are not directly stated, detecting the author's purpose and mood/viewpoint, determining accuracy and relevance of material—while simultaneously getting at the heart of historical thinking and the sourcing and corroboration heuristics.

What works: Putting reading comprehension strategies to work within historical contexts

Those that emphasize question answering and/or use of graphic organizers focus mainly on the first two facets of interpretive and critical reading—inferences and author intent—while going straight at the heart of the sourcing heuristic, and while contributing to the simple but important ability to locate, organize, and make sense of relevant information. When taken together, detailed reading comprehension analyses (NRP, 2000) have revealed 28 scientifically based research studies that bear direct evidence of the effectiveness of question answering instruction and the use of graphic organizers. Graphic organizers, diagrams or pictorial devices that display relationships (Harris & Hodges, 1995), have turned up results that are especially effective in content areas such as science, social studies, and alas, history. The gains are not only in text content reading in those domain-specific areas, but in the specific content understanding, with no "reading comprehension middle man" standing between it and test measures (four studies cited by the NRP alone). Additional studies by historians and history educators represent further evidence of effectiveness of linking relationships on graphic organizers in the form of concept maps for establishing student understanding of internal as well as external conceptual consistency (carry-over or transfer to other unique situations) of historical models—ideas, events, and even temporal (unusual to say the least) arrangements (Herl, Baker, & Niemi, 1996; Wineburg, 1991). As "reading to learn" and "learning to read" are also both reinforced through story-form narrative (Levstik & Pappas, 1987), story mapping represents another form of mutually beneficial use of graphic organizers. Story mapping uniquely addresses reading comprehension needs when working with story structure, while simultaneously helping students to understand story-form historical narrative—greatly enhancing student learning by promoting the ability to reconstruct historical paths and creating a macro-context for scientific inquiry and understanding.

> Though directed at a somewhat different learning objective, the conjunctive use of graphic organizers and question answering instruction toward developing students' abilities to analyze story structure may prove nonetheless instructive (see Improving Reading Comprehension: Putting Story Structure Instruction to Work for Student Learning).

Through all of this, however, question generation—possibly *the* most evidence-supported category of reading comprehension instruction with 30 studies cited in a comprehensive meta-analysis by Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman (1996), 11 in conjunction with another method as part of reciprocal teaching where the teacher models what he or she would do to try to understand the text—may be an even more highly prized tool for historical sourcing, especially when tackled via the corroboration heuristic. As historians piece together an interlocking network of components related to a central source or past event, they continually ask questions that "target purpose"—that

get at which parts introduce inaccuracies or are not relevant to the picture as a whole. So must students, and in so doing, address the third facet of interpretive and critical reading discussed above—determining accuracy and relevance of material.

Teach them well: Getting at skills that last

An interesting aspect uncovered by the evidence now available is that students do not make that leap on their own. We must teach them. It's bold, and it *seems* simple enough… but it is difficult to teach true thinking skills, especially ones that require such a high degree of metacognition and self-regulation. The stakes are raised by the realization of the effectiveness of comprehension monitoring, often referred to as metacognitive awareness. Though viewed by some as another category of instruction, it serves more as a lens through which to view our lesson design, and a guide by which to establish our student learning goals and approach our instruction in pursuit of those goals. As the term "metacognition" would imply, the learning goal for students is nothing less than the ability to recognize what works for the sake of their own learning, and to choose and adjust strategies as needed depending on the task requirements (Elliott-Faust & Pressley, 1986; Harris & Hodges, 1995; Markman, 1978; Taylor & Frye, 1992). Other than the obvious need to modify approach and expectation, and the need at any grade to carefully choose the specific source types utilized, age is not a significant constraining factor for integration into lesson design. The findings of the NRP indicate success with metacognitive strategy instruction in reading comprehension in grades 2-6 (mode at grade 4), while the various strategies we suggest using in tandem show positive results for numerous studies across grades 1-9 (modal grades usually ranging from 4-6). In history education circles, the abilities necessary for "sourcing" and historical thinking have been shown for many years to be achievable by students even in the lower grades in elementary school (Zaccaria, 1978), so much so that they now comprise their own set of related process-oriented standards (standards in historical thinking) in the United States' *K-4 National Standards for History* (National Center for History in the Schools [NCHS], 1996). We employ metacognitive approaches as an umbrella approach, or in another way of speaking, a thread that runs through each of the other techniques we use in a variety of grades. Despite the grade, however, it again must be "taught," through modeling and teacher-student interaction in each of the other areas of instruction mentioned. Of course, we'll be prepared to do that regardless, given that we are trying to actively engage students in the "unnatural" act of historical thinking. It is also clear that the details of our approach must perceptibly change with each new context or set of circumstances.

> Classroom observations clearly show the difficulties… there seems to be either little teaching of strategic skills, or incorrect teaching of strategic skills.
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> "Indeed, the situation seemed to be much as Durkin described it two decades ago, with a great deal of testing of comprehension but very little teaching of it… In general, students were provided with opportunities to practice comprehension strategies, but were not actually taught the strategies themselves nor the utility value of applying them." (Pressley, 1998)
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> "For much of the academic year, the four teachers required from their students counterproductive 'answers' and 'routes'… students' responses to interview probes during fall and winter suggested incomplete conceptions or misconceptions about what it means to be strategic." (Duffy, 1993)

Eight studies cited by the NRP and a mounting body of evidence from both reading and subject-area specialists is beginning to also support claims for the effectiveness of *curriculum plus strategy instruction*—strategy-specific reading comprehension skill training within the context and content of specific subjects and topics of study. Interestingly, and further bolstering Wineburg's claim for the importance and relevance of domain-specific knowledge, no *curriculum plus* study has been located to our knowledge that supports the value of a particular model that extends unaltered across multiple subjects. Coupling these data with the value of context-based approaches for learning vocabulary (six studies specifically dealing with subject-context acquisition as identified by the NRP), and the additional natural fit for the use of graphic organizers (seven studies showing positive effect) in conjunction with content-rich reading, makes a persuasive argument for a parallel approach to learning history—or any subject—along with efforts to improve reading comprehension.

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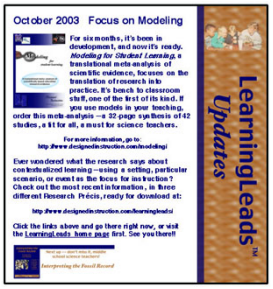

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