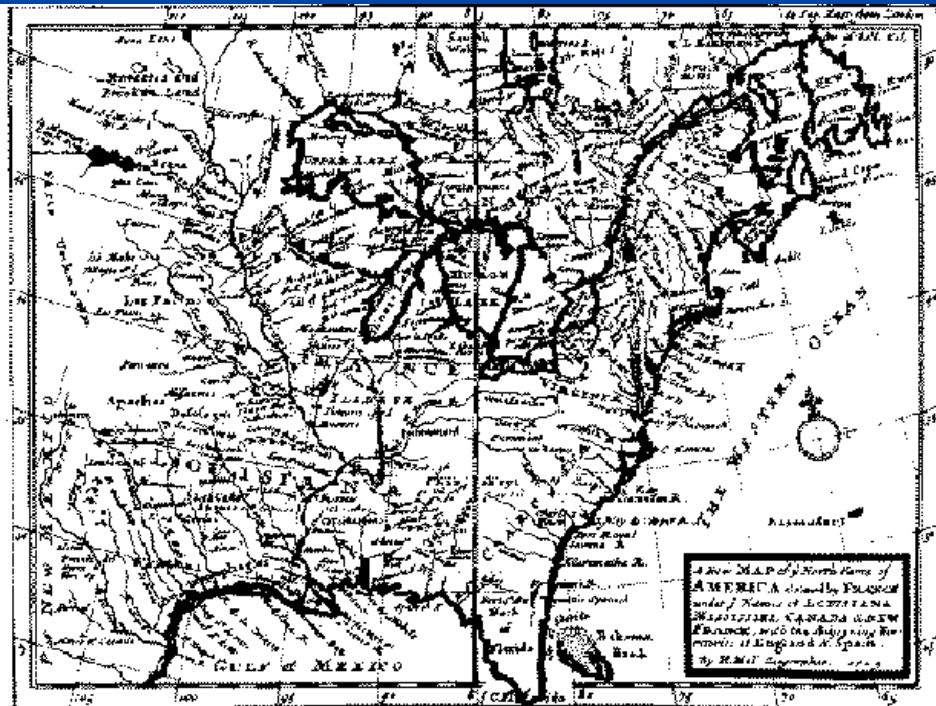


Struggling to Make Sense of Historical Sources—When Generic Reading-Comprehension Strategies Are Simply Not Enough



Bruce VanSledright
Visiting Professor
Graduate School of Education
UC-Berkeley

California Council for History
Education Conference
24 September 2006

Some Assumptions...

- History is **the study of the residue from past** with a view to **understanding** what occurred and why.
 - The Activity— "the study of" = Working with tools (reading).
 - The Object— "residue from the past" = Sources.
 - The Goal— "understanding the object" = Making sense of sources.
- The student of history—working with **tools—operates on the object** to reach the **goal of understanding** the past.
- A **claim of understanding** is supported by accumulation of **evidence** derived from **sources**.

In 1623, Francis Bacon wrote,

“Neither the hand nor the mind alone would amount to much without *aids and tools* to perfect them.”

Therefore, in order to study history well, students must have good tools and knowledge of how to use them.

Using Sources in the History Classroom: Illustrating What Can Happen...

British Captain Thomas Preston. Testimony about Boston Shootings, 13 March 1770.

On my way, I saw the Boston people in great commotion, and heard them use the most cruel. . . threats against the troops. In a few minutes. . . , about 100 people passed. . . and went towards the Custom House. . . They. . . surrounded the [soldier] posted there, and with clubs and other weapons threatened. . . him....

The mob [grew]. . . , striking their clubs. . . one against another, and calling out, "Come on you rascals, you bloody backs, you lobster scoundrels, fire if you dare, . . . damn you, fire! We know you dare not. . . ." **Some well-behaved persons asked me. . . if I intended to order the men to fire. I answered, "No, by no means. . . ."** While I was speaking, one of the soldiers received a severe blow with a stick, stepped. . . on one side, and instantly fired. . . . [I asked] why he fired without orders. [He said,] "I was struck with a club on my arm. . . ."

. . . A general attack was made on the [soldiers] by a great number of. . . clubs and snowballs. . . . Our lives were in imminent danger. . . . Instantly, three or four of the soldiers fired, one after another, and [then] three more [firings] in the same confusion and hurry. . . . **[When I asked] the soldiers why they fired without orders, they said they heard the word fire, and supposed it came from me. . . .**

From British Public Records Office, C. O. 5/759. Reprinted in M. Jensen (editor) *English Historical Documents Volume IX*. (London, 1964) p. 750-53.

Illustrating What Can Happen...

Complex sources require helping students learn to read them.

—Reading strategies I often see taught...

- What's the "*main idea*" in paragraph one?
- Did you have trouble with the vocabulary? Which words? Let's build a "*word wall*" on those we don't know.
- When you ran into things you didn't understand, did you "*re-read*" them?
- When you finished a paragraph, did you mentally "*summarize*" what you just read?
- How *do you feel* about what the author is saying?

But then an odd thing happens...

...students encounter and read other accounts of the shootings...

“I was there when the shooting occurred. I was about 30 feet away. I heard the officer who I recognized to be **Captain Preston give the orders to fire twice**. I looked him in the face when he gave the word and saw his mouth move. It was moonlight and I could see well enough. I ran after I heard the word fire.”

Daniel Calef (Boston citizen), 1770. Modernized version of original testimony at the trial of the British soldiers accused of murdering Boston citizens. From Ghere & Spreeman (1998). *Causes of the American Revolution: Focus on Boston, Los Angeles: the Regents, University of California*.

“I went to the Custom House after the crowd had gathered. They were yelling at the soldiers and the soldiers were pointing their muskets at the crowd. Suddenly Private White recognized me and shouted, “Go home or you will be killed,” but I stayed on. I saw a man in the crowd knock down a soldier with a piece of wood. Then I saw a man dressed in dark clothing—not an officer—tell one of the soldiers to fire and slapped him on the shoulder. The soldier fired immediately. **I am certain the Captain gave no orders to fire.**”

Jane Whitehouse (Boston citizen), 1770. Modernized version of original testimony at the trial of the British soldiers accused of murdering Boston citizens. From Ghere & Spreeman (1998). *Causes of the American Revolution: Focus on Boston, Los Angeles: the Regents, University of California*.

Students Encounter...

- **Variability in testimonies of what occurred...**
- **Students may ask:**
 - How do I understand these conflicting sources as I try to make sense of the Boston shootings?
 - How do I decide which to accept?
 - Which one presents the best evidence?
 - What do I do with a problem like this?
 - Should the textbook be the best source?

Teachers Ask...

- How far will “looking for the main idea,” “rereading,” and being able to “summarize” take my students?
- How will such reading strategies help my kids make sense of conflicting accounts?
- What additional strategies might they need?
- What are they?
- How do I teach them?

Making Sense of Historical Sources...

- Recent research tells us that many history teachers are going beyond the textbook and using additional historical sources.
- Sources often present conflicting perspectives.
- Generic reading strategies are important and necessary, but are not sufficient.
- In the history classroom, **all texts are sources**—the textbook, the teacher's lecture, the digitized primary accounts, other secondary accounts...
- Students need more powerful tools to make sense of these differing accounts.

It's all about the nature of **historical evidence**...

- Sources present **evidence** (or not) for **answering questions** about the past:
 - Did Captain Preston give an order to fire on Boston civilians in March, 1770? What different might it make if he did?
- **Evidence** is a key idea in the study of the past.
- What do students typically know about the idea of **evidence**?

What Are We Likely to See Among Students?

Research on progression from weak to strong ideas about historical sources as evidence:

First Level: Least sophisticated type of thinking, very common among students in all K-12 grades. Characteristics:

- Student reads the past and history as exact **copies** of each other.
- Basis of statements in **sources is not questioned**.
- Student may develop an idea that the past is **copied down by some fixed authority** (e.g., textbook authors).
- Historical accounts are read as **information that is correct or not**.

We call this student **“The Copier”**

Research on Progression of Students' Ideas

Second Level: Moderately sophisticated historical thinking.

Characteristics:

- Past can be known because we have **eyewitnesses**.
- Student develops ideas about bias, exaggeration, and information loss
- This fosters **truth-versus-lying** dichotomies.
- Fix this problem by deciding in favor of the **"best reports"**:
Eyewitnesses are **judged** to be the best.
- A version of what happened can be built by **cutting and pasting** the **best pieces** of accounts together.

We call this student **"The Borrower"**

Research on Progression...

Third Level—Sophisticated and powerful form of thinking and reading; is not learned without being taught.

Characteristics:

- Student realizes the past is **inferred from sources of evidence**.
- Develops the idea of **reliability of sources**.
- Realizes that **reliability** is an idea imposed on a source based on the **question being asked**.
- Sources only produce evidence when they are **understood in their historical context**.
- Develops a **specific reading tool set**, which includes **criteria for evaluating reliability of sources**.

We call this student **“The Criterialist”**

Why Does This Research Matter?

■ **The Copier...** (the most common student)

- May be able to *re-read, summarize, and find the main idea,*

BUT...

- Does not know what to do when source documents provide conflicting ideas.
 - Remains intellectually helpless. Cannot reason historically.
 - Dismisses new ideas that are not consistent with earlier ideas.
 - **Understanding history is compromised.**
- Generic reading strategies are necessary, but not sufficient to help this student.

Why Does This Research Matter?

■ The Borrower...

Is beginning to understand idea of sources as evidence,

But...

- Adopts a truth-versus-lie dichotomy about them.
- Because this idea cannot help resolve disputes, it fosters a form of corrosive relativism: **History is just people's opinions.**
- Again, generic reading capabilities are important, but not sufficient to improve historical understanding.

Why Does This Research Matter?

■ **The Criterialist...**

- **Learns to read and judge sources as forms of evidence for answering historical questions.**
- **Possesses powerful reading and cognitive tools.**
- **Can answer historical questions by carefully reading and evaluating sources.**

The Need to Teach History-Specific Reading Tools and Strategies

■ What are they?

Knowing how to...

1. **Ask historical questions.**
2. **Find sources** to address questions.
3. **Assess the status of sources:**
 - **Identifying and Attributing** a source.
 - **Understanding and Assessing Perspective.**
 - **Judging Source Reliability** (via corroborating accounts).
4. **Interpret within historical context.**
5. **Construct an evidence-based argument** while reading.

Suggests an Approach to Teaching History...

- Investigative in nature:
 - Answering intriguing historical questions
 - Motivates and engages students
- Multiple accounts used—inter-textual reading required.
- Teaching comprehension strategies taught while also introducing history-specific strategies.
- Accounts considered as evidence.
- Evidence evaluated in order to answer questions.

Ask a Historical Question:
Why did British soldiers shoot dead five
Boston citizens in March, 1770?

Locate and Examine Sources
Eyewitness Testimonials
Newspapers

Assess the Status of the Sources
—Identify and Attribute them
—Assess the Perspectives they contain
—Judge their Reliability corroboratively
and with regard to the question

Build and Refine an Interpretation
—Employ ideas such as
causation, reading the historical context

**Write up the Interpretation as an Argument
That Addresses the Question Asked**



**This looks like tough teaching and it's already tough
enough! Or,
My kids can't do that! So why would I try it?**

- **Students dislike history, a lot!**
- **Most textbooks are lousy and most kids won't read them no matter how well they read.**
- **Kids think history is dead? Why study a dead subject?**
- **Results on what kids learn about history are pretty miserable.**
- **We need to do something different...**

So, Does This Work? Is it Worth the Trouble?

- Yes, the research indicates that it works.
- Very engaging and motivating to kids.
- Enables critical reading.
- Teaches effective evaluation of messages students hear—powerful form of cultural literacy.
- Necessary for successful life in an information-dominated society.
- Even though it's difficult, it has to be worth the trouble, for the students' sake!

John F. Kennedy once said:

***“We choose to do this, not because it is easy,
but because it is hard.”***

For a copy of this presentation, contact me at:

bvansled@umd.edu

Key resources to check out:

Donovan, S. & Bransford, J. (Eds.) (2005). *How students learn: History in the Classroom*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

Lee, P.J. & Shemilt, D. (2003). A scaffold, not a cage: Progression and progression models in history. *Teaching History*, 113, 13-24.

VanSledright, B. (2002). *In search of America's past: Learning to read history in elementary school*. New York: Teachers College Press.

VanSledright, B. (2004). What does it mean to think historically and how do you teach it? *Social Education*, 68, 230-233.