

Disciplinary Literacy in History

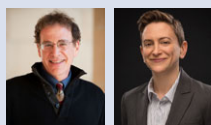
A Toolkit for Digital Citizenship

SAM WINEBURG & ABBY REISMAN

Let's begin with what disciplinary literacy is not. It is not “reading for main idea,” “predicting word meaning from context,” summarizing, backtracking, or any host of generic reading strategies. Such strategies matter, to be sure. They may even form the bedrock of fluent reading (cf. Faggella-Luby, Graner, Deshler, & Drew, 2012). But there is nothing uniquely disciplinary about them—the claims of content-area reading texts notwithstanding (e.g., Vacca & Vacca, 2002).

Students doubtlessly need basic strategies for decoding text. But if that's all they have, their reading will be stunted. They may be able to render a passable summary, but they will remain spectators, passively gazing at the arena of knowledge production. If they are fortunate enough to make it to college, they will arrive there “college *unready*” and ill-prepared for the challenges that await them.

Disciplinary literacy restores agency to the reader. Consider the quintessential move in disciplinary literacy in history, the act of sourcing (Wineburg, 1991; 2001). Sourcing enjoins readers to engage authors, querying them about their credentials, their interest in the story they are telling, their



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Water Cooler

This month's department column signals the end of this JAAL volume, and I am truly pleased to offer a column that is thoughtful and thought-provoking. I invited Sam Wineburg and Abby Reisman to address issues related to disciplinary literacy in history because I have used their work for many years with my students. They have collaborated on issues of disciplinary literacy since 2004. It was their collaboration, along with Brad Fogo, that led to the launch of the Reading Like a Historian program, an online curriculum that has been downloaded more than 1.5 million times. V.G.

position vis-à-vis the event they narrate. In every study of historical reading, bar none, sourcing is the touchstone that distinguishes expert from novice practice (e.g., De La Paz, Felton, Croninger, Monte-Sano, & Jackson, in press; Gottlieb & Wineburg, 2012; Monte-Sano & De La Paz, 2012; Mosborg, 2002; Leinhardt & Young, 1996; Nokes, Dole, & Hacker, 2007; Rouet, Favart, Britt, & Perfetti, 1997; Reisman, 2012; Shanahan, Shanahan, & Misischia, 2011; Shreiner, 2014; Wineburg, 1998).

Yet to label sourcing a “strategy”—even a disciplinary one—belies its radicalism. Sourcing is a *weltanschauung*, an entire way of apprehending the world. Sourcing rocks the foundation on which the school textbook rests: that its facts are unassailable and need not be questioned, interrogated, or overturned. Sourcing changes the one-way relationship between text and reader (cf. Moje, 2007). Reading becomes a dialectic between an active agent and human author, who may or may not be playing with a full deck.

The consequences of failing to source can be ruinous. If you think this is hyperbole, consider what happened in Rialto, California in 2014 where a group of middle school teachers gave eighth-graders a written exam inspired by the new Common Core State Standards. Teachers had gone online and culled what they deemed “credible” documents, representing different points of view. The issue under debate was the Holocaust—whether it was real or a hoax concocted by world Jewry “for political or monetary gain” (Yarbrough, 2014a).

One of these “credible” documents claimed that the diary of Anne Frank was a fake and that pictures of

piled corpses were actually “murdered Germans, not Jews” (Rialto Unified School District, 2014). Many students found this document the most convincing. “There was no evidence or prove [sic] that there were gas chambers,” wrote one student. Another wrote, “I believe the event was a fake, according to source 2, the event was exaggerated [sic]” (Yarbrough, 2014b). Had teachers sourced the document they would have learned that it came from the website of the *Institute for Historical Review*, a Holocaust denial group aligned with Aryan supremacists.

As this example chillingly demonstrates, sourcing undergirds all of historical reading. But disciplinary literacy extends beyond sourcing, providing the reader tools not only to interrogate but also to learn. Take, for example, the skill of *contextualization*, in which the reader questions the social and political circumstances surrounding the text in order to gain greater insight into the historical period (Seixas & Morton, 2013; Reisman & Wineburg, 2008; Reisman & Fogo, 2014; Monte-Sano, 2010). For the novice reader, the available information begins and ends with the text. For historical readers, the text becomes a portal to another time.

Contextualization anchors texts in place and time. What would it look like to read a historical document without considering the historical context? Unfortunately, we need not look far. Many of the curricular materials designed to promote and align with Common Core Standards have recast historical documents as “informational texts,” rendering equivalent the universe of non-fiction texts—whether a speech by Frederick Douglass, an article on extinct birds, or a pamphlet on the tax code.

Consider a lesson on the Gettysburg Address, featured as an “exemplar” on New York State’s Common Core website as well a site created by key writers of the standards. The lesson’s guiding questions are exclusively “text-dependent,” focusing on either literal interpretation (e.g., “What four specific ideas does Lincoln ask his listeners to commit themselves to at the end of his speech?”) or analysis of Lincoln’s word choice (“What if Lincoln had used the verb ‘start’ instead of ‘conceive?’”) (Thurtell, 2013).

The authors warn teachers that historical context lies beyond the scope of comprehension. Questions about the Civil War should be avoided because they are “non text-dependent.” Their recommended approach supposedly “forces students to rely exclusively on the text instead of privileging background knowledge” in the hope of “level[ing] the playing field for all students” (Student Achieve-

ment Partners, p. 3). A consideration of context, these curriculum writers claim, “take[s] the student away from the actual point Lincoln is making in the text of the speech regarding equality and self-government” (p. 19).

But, as one frustrated teacher asked, “Does anyone think that [Lincoln] could speak about equality without everyone in his audience knowing he was talking about slavery and the causes of the war? How can anyone try to disconnect this profoundly meaningful speech from its historical context and hope to ‘deeply’ understand it in any way, shape, or form?” (Strauss, 2012). Separating Lincoln’s address from Lincoln’s plight as leader of a blood-stained nation renders his words meaningless.

Disciplinary literacy calls on students to bring the full weight of their intellect to the act of reading. In addition to sourcing and contextualization, acts of corroboration, and close reading are crucial to making sense of historical texts. Fortunately, a host of excellent books have appeared in recent years that provide teachers with extensive treatment of historical literacy (Lesh, 2014; Nokes, 2013; Thompson & Austin, 2014; Monte-Sano, De La Paz, & Felton, 2014; Wineburg, Martin, & Monte-Sano, 2011).

We, along with our colleagues at the Stanford History Education Group, have invested countless hours in creating materials for middle and high school teachers that engage students in disciplinary literacy. Students who used our *Reading Like a Historian* curriculum outperformed peers on reading comprehension, historical reasoning, and factual recall (Reisman, 2012). Today, the curriculum is distributed freely on our website (sheg.stanford.edu). It is used in all 50 states and 127 different countries, and since going live in 2010 has been downloaded more than one million times (Johnston, 2014).

It is time, however, for us to come clean about the real intention of the *Reading Like a Historian* curriculum: it has nothing to do with preparing students to become historians. If our curriculum has anything to do with career preparation, it is not about the profession of historian. Its focus is the vocation of the citizen.

The digital world demands this approach. Self-appointed experts swarm the Net practicing historiography without a license. The Internet purveys the “knowledge” that Martin Luther King was a communist agent and that President Obama was born in Kenya—a claim that continues to raise doubt among a quarter of the American populace (Berinsky, 2012).

Too often our so-called digital natives cede the responsibility for assaying the credibility of information to their browser (Hargittai, Fullerton, Menchen-Trevino, & Yates, 2010).

In a democracy, the ill-informed hold just as much power in the ballot box as the well-informed (McManus, 2012). Long before the advent of the Internet, James Madison understood that information, without a citizenry equipped to evaluate it, was worthless. In a letter to W. T. Barry in 1822, Madison (cited in Hunt, 1910) cautioned that

Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or perhaps, both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives. (p. 103)

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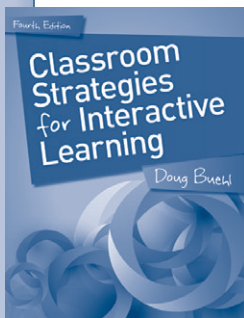
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