

“What is the Text Doing?” Preparing Pre-Service Teachers to Teach Primary Sources Effectively

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RECENT EDUCATION RESEARCH¹ strongly endorses the notion that knowledge is discipline-based, dependent upon the ground rules and procedures of a particular field of study.² Since reading primary sources is central to the discipline of history, many teacher preparation programs in history-social science devote substantial instructional time to training teachers to use primary sources. At the same time, however, scholars have been critical of the inadequate student reading of primary sources that often results from the use of documents in the classroom.³ As Sam Wineburg cogently argues, students have an epistemology about the past fundamentally different from historians, influencing the naïve way they read documents.⁴ Robert B. Bain has pointed out that, all too often, history teachers are unaware of their students’ thinking because they assess the effectiveness of their instruction through behaviorist measurements of student *activity*, rather than attending to the more vital (but more difficult to measure) student *thinking*.⁵ Teachers are pleased, for example, when students dutifully answer a series of questions from the National Archives and Records Administration,⁶ without exploring how students’ understanding about the source has increased by answering those questions. More importantly, in many cases, teachers’ inability to shape students’ understanding of primary sources reflects their own epistemologies: they remain philosophically naïve in their approach to documents, unable to

engage student thinking in a disciplinary way. They cannot teach their students to do what they cannot do themselves. More attention needs to be paid to training teachers in effectively using primary sources with students. Teacher education programs ought to provide a clear, systematic understanding of the disciplinary epistemology of historians to shape the thinking of pre-service teachers and simultaneously provide them with a more sophisticated methodology for training students in the use of documents.

I would like to suggest that a focus on the purposive nature of texts in teacher education programs offers the best pathway forward. I will begin by proposing a critical realist stance as an appropriate foundation for the use of documents with pre-service teachers. Then, I will tease out the implicit methodology sophisticated readers (historians) employ in their reading of texts, focusing on the fundamental strategy of identifying the purpose, intention, or function of texts. Next, I will describe some philosophical-linguistic resources on the purposive nature of texts that have been helpful in shaping my own thinking as a classroom teacher and in my training of pre-service teachers. The three approaches approximate descriptions Wineburg offers of the ways historians view documents. I will provide examples of how the philosophical-linguistic insights might be applied to the reading of primary sources. Finally, I will offer a coherent methodology for the teaching of primary sources in a year-long middle or high school course. Though there are surely other ways to proceed but the methodology, it offers one way to prepare teachers to challenge students' theoretical understanding of texts. As instructors in education programs systematically challenge the understanding of pre-service teachers, history teachers will learn to assist students in reading primary sources in a thoughtful, disciplined way, rather than as simply another text to read for "content."

One introductory comment is in order. My argument presupposes that the understanding of text outlined above should focus on primary sources. Some have argued that students should be taught to read textbooks in the same critical way, attempting to determine the author, point of view, etc. and evaluating their evidence and argument accordingly. For example, in his article "A Deafening Silence: History Textbooks and Students Who Read Them," Richard J. Paxton seems to advocate a critical student reading of textbooks.⁷ While I sympathize with his concerns, I doubt the feasibility of making this a routine element of classroom instruction. Given the constraints on instructional time, it seems more fruitful to distinguish heuristically between reading secondary texts for reading comprehension and primary sources for critical reconstruction. Differentiating the two highlights the distinctive nature of reading primary sources, and helps

students to concentrate on reading “suspiciously,” between the lines. Systematic second-guessing of a textbook does not seem as useful an investment in precious classroom time.

Critical Realism: A Balanced Reading of Texts

Any effort to discuss an epistemology of text implicitly raises questions about historical reality. My own understanding of the purposive nature of texts has been shaped to some extent by postmodern philosophy, but I do not embrace the position that all reality is constructed. Some postmodernist theorists seem to argue that what one is *really* doing when reading texts is uncovering the “reality” created by their authors, or, more radically, projecting one’s view onto the text, rather than discovering anything about the putative reality the documents reference.⁸ As historian Carlo Ginzburg puts it, in some academic circles, the focus on history as “representation” leads to “a general rejection of the possibility of analyzing the relationships between these representations and the reality they depict or represent; this is dismissed as an unforgivable instance of naïve positivism.”⁹ For example, though Bruce VanSledright’s work with fifth-grade students does not adopt an extreme deconstructionist position, his frequent use of wording like “mirage,” “illusion,” “reality effect,” etc.¹⁰ sometimes sounds that way.¹¹ Most of VanSledright’s actual narrative and recounting of dialogues with students suggests a much less radical epistemology.

My own view approximates that of “critical realism,”¹² a mediating position between a traditional realist theory of simple correspondence between “the past” and a document’s reference to it on the one hand, and the kind of phenomenalist skepticism described above on the other.¹³ Critical realism rejects the possibility of “objectivity” as naïve. Instead, it recognizes that an interpretation is never free from the reader’s presuppositions and is subject to revision, but insists at the same time that an interpretation can bear an adequate correspondence to the past. Critical realists assume further that the identity of the author and the historical context in which the author originally composed a text are relevant in determining meaning.¹⁴ Cautious, critical reading of texts does potentially yield an accurate, though tentative reconstruction of the past, as Ginzburg goes on to state. N.T. Wright graphically represented the critical realist position, reproduced in Figure 1.¹⁵

How is this brief discussion of philosophy relevant? A teacher with an objectivist understanding of reality might be overly rigid or prescriptive in teaching documents to students as he fishes for “the right answer.” On the other hand, a radically postmodernist teacher might not adequately press students to evaluate competing interpretations of documents, content that

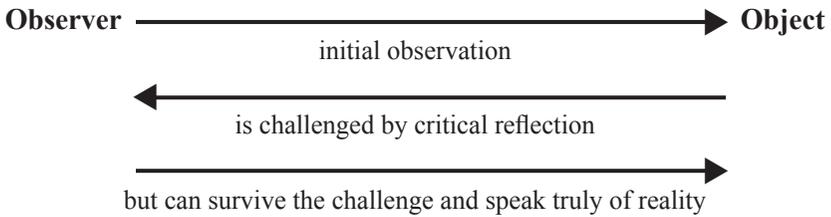


Figure 1: *The Critical Realist Position*

all accounts are equally valid. Furthermore, one of the purposive functions of texts is to refer to realities outside the text, so a theory that assumes that all “reality” is constructed by the text itself is inadequate to the task of accurately interpreting primary sources. A critical realist perspective provides teachers with a view of texts that is sufficiently open (to allow students to develop engaged, imaginative reconstructions of the world referred to in the text) and at the same time, sufficiently grounded (to allow students to evaluate the relative merits of competing interpretations of documents and to revise and improve their own interpretations through repeated reference to the document).

“What is the Text Doing?”: The Purposive Nature of Texts

At a workshop I attended a few years ago, Wineburg shared a humorous anecdote with a group of teachers about sitting in an undergraduate class with the famed scholar of Judaica, Jacob Neusner. The essence of the story is that, after reading a passage from Genesis, Neusner demanded of one student after another: “What is the text doing?” Each student offered an elaborate answer, each of which Neusner rejected out of hand. Finally, Neusner pounced on an intimidated Wineburg, who answered, “Sir, I have no idea what the text is doing,” to which the famed professor announced that this was the best answer he had heard all day. This anecdote offers a key insight into the reading of documents: texts are purposive, intentional, and are “doing something.” This assumption is essential for an engaged reading of documents.¹⁶ This same point is made more obliquely in a chapter of *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, where Wineburg lauds one professor’s reading of a document by saying that “[w]hat is most important to him is not what the text says, but what it does.”¹⁷ Both in his book and, more recently, on the website he co-directs, *Historical Thinking Matters*, Wineburg argues that historians employ heuristics of sourcing, context, and corroboration in interpreting texts.¹⁸

So why do skilled disciplinary readers employ these heuristics? What discipline-based epistemology of text informs their interaction with texts? Articulating such an epistemology systematically would enable teachers to conceptualize the task of reading documents as a distinctive cognitive activity and thus be able to present it as such to their students.

Wineburg offers many comments about how historians read documents throughout *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*. Chapter One, for example, argues that in reading primary sources, historians:

- ask why other people behaved the way they did
- puzzle over data
- actively connect data into a pattern
- stand back from their first impressions¹⁹

Chapter Three adds the following:

- comprehend the subtext—hidden and latent meanings
- look for the author’s intention
- talk with the text²⁰

While historians’ training enables them to internalize sophisticated and nuanced theories that prompt them to read documents in the ways Wineburg describes, the principles underlying this reading may remain implicit and perhaps intuitive, rather than clearly articulated. Thus it is helpful that in this same chapter, Wineburg offers a glimpse of the assumptions historians have about texts that prompt them to engage in these types of activities. Historians view documents in three ways:

- as rhetorical artifacts
- as social instruments
- as people and social exchanges²¹

The epistemology of text held by most K-12 teachers, by contrast, is often both implicit and simplistic. Even when many instructors ask questions about sourcing, context, and corroboration, and attempt to model the engaged reading of documents, they are not really puzzling over data, reading for hidden or latent meanings, or actively connecting data into a pattern, as historians do. Students learn that reading primary documents differs from reading textbooks only in the particular questions they are expected to answer. But the goal—reading comprehension—remains the same.²² It may be helpful to borrow from the explicit theories of text found in related disciplines and adapt them to more clearly articulate an epistemology of reading historical texts.

In what follows, I will draw from the works of several philosophers of language. This is not a systematic treatise; I am not an expert on these scholars. But exposure to the ideas of these authors has deepened my own understanding and reading of documents, and has consequently shaped the

ways I teach documents to my pre-service teachers. None of the authors was originally addressing the skill of reading primary sources in history in particular, so I extrapolate from their works and “translate” them to the discipline of history and, more specifically, to the teaching of history. As mentioned above, each of the three approaches I will address approximates one of the ways Wineburg says historians view documents: as rhetorical artifacts, as social instruments, and as people and social exchanges. The discussion of each author will follow the same course: a description of key philosophical ideas, an attempt to translate these insights to teachers’ understanding and reading of historical texts, and a discussion of how these translated concepts might be adopted by teachers to assist students in developing a disciplinary epistemology of the function of text—and thus to read these texts in a disciplinary way. Throughout, I will use Wineburg’s question, “What is the text doing?” as a guide to a functional approach to the reading of primary sources.

Rhetorical Analysis: Documents as Rhetorical Artifacts

The first work draws insight from the ancient world. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* was originally a handbook of practical techniques for public orators. While ancient authors delineated many subtypes of rhetoric for particular occasions, my focus will remain on the broad characteristics of rhetoric found in all the subtypes. Many high school students are exposed to the basic ideas of rhetoric in their English classes. There, they learn that rhetoric is the “art of persuasion.” Aristotle himself defined it as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.” It is “the power of observing the means of persuasion on almost any subject presented to us; and that is why we say that, in its technical character, it is not concerned with any special or definite class of subjects.”²³

Authors used the rhetorical techniques of ethos, pathos, and logos to persuade an audience of the subject of their address. *Ethos* was the speaker’s appeal to her or his own character or knowledge as a means of legitimating her or his speech. According to Aristotle, “[p]ersuasion is achieved by the speaker’s personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and readily than others . . . This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of this character before he begins to speak.”²⁴ *Pathos* was the use of particular techniques to move the audience emotionally since “our judgements,” said Aristotle, “when we are pleased and friendly are not the same as when we are pained and hostile.”²⁵ Though ancient writers warned against the use of pathos to manipulate audiences, they recognized it as a legitimate tool when it led audiences to appropriate reactions. Finally, and probably most centrally

for Aristotle and others, was *logos*: “persuasion is effected through the speech itself when we have proved a truth or an apparent truth by means of the persuasive arguments suitable to the case in question.”²⁶ In short, *logos* was the use of rational argument to convince an audience. Central to this logical strategy was the use of deductive reasoning in the form of syllogism. Probably the most famous example is:

Major premise: All humans are mortal.

Minor premise: Socrates is human.

Conclusion: Socrates is mortal.

A more common subset of the technique of syllogism, the enthymeme, leaves one premise unstated:

Major premise: All humans are mortal.

Conclusion: Socrates is mortal.

By leaving the minor premise unstated, the audience is implicitly drawn into the argument by being forced to supply the missing component themselves.

What applications do rhetorical concepts have for training pre-service teachers to understand historical texts? Returning to the definition of rhetoric as persuasion, one can easily see how the question “What is the text doing” relates conceptually and functionally to the idea that rhetoric is “a speech designed to persuade” with the assumptions that 1) because authors (or orators) have purpose or intention, 2) they choose words carefully 3) to communicate a particular message 4) to a particular audience. In short, examining rhetoric places the intentional communicative techniques of the author front and center, prompting readers to consider both the function of the author’s choices and their potential effect on their audience.²⁷ Whenever someone takes pen to paper, that person has a reason for doing so and an audience in mind, even if (as in the case of a diary) that audience is his or her future self.

How, then, could insights from rhetoric, translated to historical texts, be used to assist students in developing an appropriate epistemology of text? First, students readily understand the concept of persuasion in their own experience: they frequently attempt to convince someone of something. The problem is that students typically compartmentalize knowledge. In the case of rhetoric, in students’ minds, the technique remains bound by the discipline of literature and, for many students, probably in a subset of literary texts that were originally public orations designed to influence a crowd. Such compartmentalization is unfortunate. What is especially ironic about this compartmentalization is that one of the texts that students in high school often use to understand rhetoric is Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” clearly a historical

Rhetoric: The Art of Persuasion

Types

Judicial: Oratory of the law courts, focused on convincing judges about *past* events

- Accusation
- Defense

Deliberative: Oratory of politics, focused on persuading the assembly about a *future* course of action

- Persuasion
- Dissuasion

Demonstrative: Ceremonial oratory, focused on providing pleasure in the *present* by celebrating common values

- Praise
- Blame

Techniques

Ethos: An appeal to one's character as a means of legitimating speech

Pathos: An appeal to the emotions of the audience

Logos: The use of rational or reasoned argument

Examples: syllogism, enthymeme

Figure 2: *Types and Techniques of Rhetoric*

primary source in addition to being an outstanding exemplar of rhetoric. In his definitive, Pulitzer Prize-winning account of the early years of the civil rights movement, Taylor Branch discusses King's famed letter. He does not explicitly use the language of rhetorical analysis to examine the techniques King employed, though he implicitly analyzes it in much the same way. For example, King used pathos. Branch points out that King "expressed empathy" and "adopted an authentic tone of intimacy." King also employed logos in offering reasoned distinctions between just and unjust laws. Finally, according to Branch, King employed ethos as he "presented himself" in a variety of ways to his audience of white ministers: a "haunted," "suffering Negro;" a "pontificator;" a "supplicant;" a "fellow "bigshot;" a "teacher;" and a "fellow student." "He projected a character of nearly unassailable breadth."²⁸ I suspect that Taylor models precisely the kind of skilled reading that Wineburg has in mind when he talks about historians recognizing that documents are "rhetorical artifacts."²⁹

History teachers need to help students extrapolate these literary skills to the reading of other texts, including historical texts. Certainly not all

texts are intentionally rhetorical, in terms of their authors' knowingly utilizing classic techniques of persuasion to move a known audience toward a predetermined goal. But a great many primary sources can fruitfully be examined by explicitly linking the concepts of rhetoric to the history classroom. Teachers could begin discussion of the use of documents with the concept of persuasion. If students have not already learned about rhetoric in their English classes, history teachers can make a brief introduction. Once students have the concept of persuasion firmly in mind, they can engage in a close reading of the text, looking for evidence of 1) the author's intent; 2) significant, carefully chosen words; 3) the basic message of the text; and 4) the intended audience.

For example, one famous document that makes its way into most state standards, the Declaration of Independence, can be productively examined through rhetorical strategy. Historian David Armitage carefully analyzes the logical structure of the text. He then explicates the syllogism that constitutes the basic argument of the entire document:

The logical structure of the Declaration provides a conclusion, based on a major premise, a minor premise, and two proofs. The major premise, stated in the opening paragraph, is that causes of separation must be declared; the minor premise, in the second paragraph, is that there can be violations of principle that would justify separation. The first proof consists in the evidence that such violations have repeatedly taken place; the second proof, that no redress or remission for such violations has been offered. On these grounds, the conclusion follows that separation can be justified in "the opinions of mankind."³⁰

Speech Act Theory: Documents as Social Instruments

The second approach to an epistemology of text focuses on viewing documents as instruments that cause social change in some way. In the 1960s, philosophers John Austin and John Searle pioneered what has come to be called "speech act theory." The titles of the seminal works of each are highly suggestive of their argument: *How to Do Things with Words*³¹ and *Speech Acts*.³² Dissatisfied with theories of language that focus on speech as descriptive—and thus convey either true or false information—Austin emphasized the "performative" nature of language. He noted that in key circumstances, speech does not simply report or record, but actually creates or performs. The most famous example is that of making promises, including the taking of vows. "When I say," explained Austin, "before the registrar or altar, &c., 'I do', I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it."³³ One philosopher explained performative acts thus: "In promising I *do* the very thing which is *said* in the promise: by saying, I commit myself, I place myself under the obligation of doing."³⁴ In the case of marriage, under the proper circumstance, the very act of one person's

Speech Act Theory: How to Do Things with Words

Illocutionary acts: Speech acts that do something in saying

- Examples: stating, questioning, commanding, promising, etc.

Performatives: A subset of illocutionary acts that imply a commitment by the speaker who does what s/he says in saying it

- Example: promising

Figure 3: *Speech Act Theory*

verbally stating that she or he will marry someone makes it so. As Austin pointed out, however, “it is always necessary that the circumstances in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*, and it is very commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or other persons should *also* perform certain *other* actions ... Thus ... for (Christian) marrying, it is essential that I should not be already married with a wife live, sane and undivorced.”³⁵ Searle helpfully critiqued Austin, his former mentor, for being too rigid in looking for specific linguistic formulations to indicate performative speech acts. He pointed out that speech acts are best understood by the purpose of the utterance, which is often conveyed apart from the explicit use of performative words.³⁶ Thus, a statement can be understood as functioning as a promise without the literal use of the words “I promise.”

What are the implications of speech act theory for preparing pre-service teachers to understand and read historical texts? As in the case of rhetoric, speech act theory originally applied to speech rather than writing, and was limited to certain types of speech. Therefore, speech act theory must be adapted to the reading of historical texts.³⁷ Beyond the original examples of explicit performative speech acts, Austin deduced the existence of a much larger category that he called “illocutionary acts”: the speaker engages in the “performance of an act in saying something.”³⁸ In some cases, by speaking:

we shall also be performing such an act as:

- asking or answering a question,
- giving some information or an assurance or a warning,
- announcing a verdict or an intention,
- pronouncing sentence,
- making an appointment or an appeal or a criticism,
- making an identification or giving a description,

and the numerous alike.³⁹

Thus, these ideas could usefully be applied to a range of primary sources. The most powerful insight for the discipline of history is the conceptualization of speech or text as fundamentally dynamic: language is “communicative action.” That is, it has the power to enact. Speech act theorists discuss the effects that speech has on the “actions, thoughts, or beliefs” of its hearers: by arguing I may *persuade* or *convince* someone, by warning I may *scare* or *alarm* the listener, by making a request I may *get the listener to do something*, by informing I may *convince* (*enlighten, edify, inspire, get the listener to realize*).⁴⁰ Paul Ricouer argued that speech act theory implies that the author who makes a “statement, order, wish, promise, etc.” has the “intention of being identified, acknowledged, and recognized as such by the other.”⁴¹ The intention of communicating with one’s audience seems to approximate what Wineburg means when he describes primary sources as “social instruments.”⁴²

What are the implications for reshaping students’ epistemologies of these texts? Most high school students have probably not been exposed to speech act theory, and therefore cannot transfer their knowledge as they might in the case of rhetoric. However, students can readily understand examples of performative speech acts. Clear examples of the use of language to make something happen reinforce powerfully the original idea that a text is “doing something.” Conversely, the fact that the words have to be said in the right circumstances to have performative force (e.g., a student’s facetious vow of marriage to a classmate does not have performative force) could be used to underline for students the fact that context and audience fundamentally determine the purpose and meaning of texts.

The Declaration of Independence provides a classic example of a performative speech act: the act of declaring independence makes it so. As historian David Armitage says:

The final substantive sentence of the Declaration of Independence now defined more precisely what it would mean to take the part of “one of the powers of the earth”:

as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.

Congress had been exercising most of the rights it now formally claimed—negotiating with Britain, appointing agents to work on its behalf abroad, corresponding with foreign powers, seeking aid—for almost two years before the Declaration. Among those rights was the authority to make meaningful declarations to the “candid world.” The Declaration itself was just such an act. It was a speech-act that not only *communicated* the fact of the independence of the United States to the world but by so doing also *performed* the independence it declared.⁴³

Examination of this document could focus on the ways in which the Declaration does the thing that it claims. It might provoke an interesting conversation about the moment at which the United States became the United States, the extent to which the act of declaring changed the relationship between Britain and its colonies, and how the meaning of this document might have been different if the patriots had not succeeded in achieving independence.

Discourse Analysis: Documents as People and Social Exchanges

Finally, I will discuss some of the ideas of the late French philosopher Paul Ricoeur.⁴⁴ To this point, I have been assuming that the principles that guide speech can be applied more or less directly to written texts. Indeed, in important ways, the two share structural similarities as communication. Ricoeur adapted Roman Jakobson's schema of six factors of discourse in his effort to analyze writing: speaker, hearer, medium, code, situation, and message. The meaning of speaker, hearer, and message is clear. Medium referred to the means or mode of communication (e.g., speech versus various types of writing). Code referred to the genre, such as poetry, narrative, or essay. When a speaker utilizes a particular genre, "[l]anguage is submitted to the rules of a kind of craftsmanship, which allows us to speak of ... works of discourse."⁴⁵ The situation was the context that surrounds the speaker (and, in the case of speech, the hearer as well).

Despite the dynamics common to both speech and written language, they differ in significant ways, most importantly in the "mode": something happens to language when it is turned into writing, and this change "irradiates in every direction, affecting in a decisive manner all the factors and functions."⁴⁶ Writing played a significant role in the maintenance of order in ancient civilizations. Ricoeur explained, "To the possibility of transferring orders over long distances without serious distortions may be connected the birth of political rule exercised by a distant state."⁴⁷ In like manner, writing enabled the development of markets, historiography, and jurisprudence. But writing also fails to convey as much as speech. While the propositional content is most easily transferred from speaker to text, the "mental act" that expresses the intention of the speaker—to persuade, scare, enlighten, etc.—often cannot be fully conveyed in text.⁴⁸ Text additionally differs from speech in that a text's "speaker" is no longer present, so that the immediate link between the "sayer" and "what is said" is broken. When "the author is not available for questioning,"⁴⁹ understanding the meaning of the text becomes a more challenging process.⁵⁰ Given that some words are polyvalent or that speakers are sometimes unclear (or, perhaps, that recipients are inattentive), the message in a particular speech is not always clearly communicated.

[I]t is the contextual function of discourse to screen, so to speak, the polysemy of our words and to reduce the plurality of possible interpretations, the ambiguity of discourse resulting from the unscreened polysemy of the words. And it is the function of dialogue to initiate this screening function of the context. The contextual is the dialogical. It is in this precise sense that the contextual role of dialogue reduces the field of misunderstanding concerning the propositional content ...⁵¹

According to Ricoeur, speech is discursive. It is precisely the element of dialogue that is absent from text. While written language retains all the potential to confuse through ambiguous wording or unclear syntax, the reader has less assistance in making sense of the text. With the author absent, the text is potentially freed from its author's intent to mean more than she or he ostensibly meant. As Ricoeur pointed out, "His intention is often unknown to us, sometimes redundant, sometimes useless, and sometimes even harmful as regards the interpretation of the verbal meaning of his work ... The surpassing of the intention by the meaning signifies precisely that understanding takes place in a nonpsychological and properly semantical space, which the text has carved out by severing itself from the mental intention of its author."⁵²

In a similar manner, the fact that the contemporary reader does not share the "situation" of the original author exacerbates the problem of interpretation. In spoken language, the speaker and hearer share the same situation:

This situation surrounds the dialogue, and its landmarks can all be shown by a gesture or by pointing a finger. Or it can be designated in an ostensive manner by the discourse itself through the oblique reference of those indicators which include the demonstratives, the adverbs of time and place, and the tenses of the verb. Finally they can be described in such a definite way that one, and only one, thing may be identified within the common framework of reference ... It is this grounding of reference in the dialogical situation that is shattered by writing.⁵³

How can this seeming impasse be broken? Ricoeur proposed a variation on the model of the "hermeneutical circle," in which a reader interprets the parts through the whole and the whole through the parts in cyclical fashion. He described interpretation as a dynamic process which begins by *understanding*: the reader makes a "guess" as to the author's meaning. Ricoeur described this guess as a "naïve grasp" of the whole. This corresponds with the intuitive component of reading. The second step is *explanation*. Here the reader "validates" a guess through an analysis of the text itself, investigating the parts by examining the structure, tools, and strategy of the author.⁵⁴ The final step is *comprehension*, a return to the original starting point of *understanding*, and hence the completion

The Hermeneutical Circle, According to Paul Ricoeur

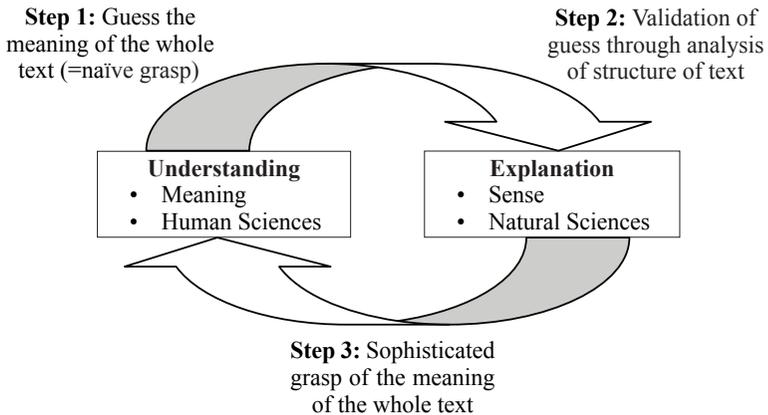


Figure 4: The Hermeneutical Circle

of the hermeneutical circle. This final step represents a second, more sophisticated reading of the entire text.⁵⁵ This process of interpretation does not offer proof of correct answers in an empirical way. It is more akin to a “logic of probability than to a logic of empirical verification.” This is a result of 1) the distance between the author and the text and 2) the distance of the reader from the author and original situation. The result is Ricoeur’s well-known “surplus of meaning.” This does not mean that all interpretations are equally valid. As Ricoeur explained, “The text presents a limited field of possible constructions. The logic of validation allows us to move between the two limits of dogmatism and scepticism. It is always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them and to seek agreement, even if this agreement remains beyond our immediate reach.”

How can Ricoeur’s insights be applied to shape teachers’ disciplined reading of historical texts? First, Ricoeur provided a model for the nature of all communicative action. Attention to the various components reminds readers of “what the text is doing” by drawing attention to 1) the speaker who lived in 2) a particular situation who is 3) communicating a message through 4) the medium of writing 5) using a chosen code to address 6) a hearer. But given the uncertainty that resides in written texts, there is a level of uncertainty in interpretation that invites the kind of informed guessing Ricoeur described. Historians’ skilled reading of documents follows the

Discourse Theory: Speech and Writing as Communicative Acts

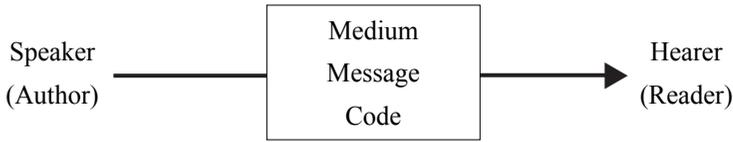


Figure 5: Discourse Theory Diagram

guess-validation hermeneutical circle that Ricoeur described, even if it is more intuitive than formal. Consequently, this process provides an explicit model for skilled reading. This model recognizes the need to imaginatively engage with the text, and acknowledges the possibility of a range of acceptable readings, limited according to the indicators in the text itself.

Though the abstraction of this model provides many pitfalls for students, a simplified model still provides many useful insights for instruction. When I was teaching high school students, I developed a generic graphic representation that I displayed whenever students examine documents. It shows two silhouettes facing each other (“speaker” and “hearer”) surrounded by an oval (representing their shared context—one that does not include the contemporary reader) with an arrow going from one to the other to indicate the medium and the message. At the top of the page is a “thought bubble” to provide students with a place to brainstorm in an open-ended way before attempting to determine what historical context will help them to interpret the document. The illustration reminds students that documents began as dynamic realities, written approximations of speech, and that making sense of documents requires attempting to identify these elements as best they can. Helping students see how text is different from speech enables them to see the challenges inherent in reading primary sources.

While the paper has assumed that students are engaged in reading written primary sources, it is clearly important that they learn to read other kinds of sources, including visual ones. Visual sources function like written ones, engaging in a “discourse” with their audience. Thus, the same kind of analysis of written documents can be applied to non-written ones. Given the closer link between speech and writing, I think it is useful to work with written documents earlier in the course and then explicitly teach students to transfer the principles they have thus far been applying to written documents also to visual ones. This would confront students’ general tendency to see images as neutral. Long after students have been exposed to the idea that written sources can be biased, misleading, etc., they persist in pre-critical assumptions about images, especially photographs.

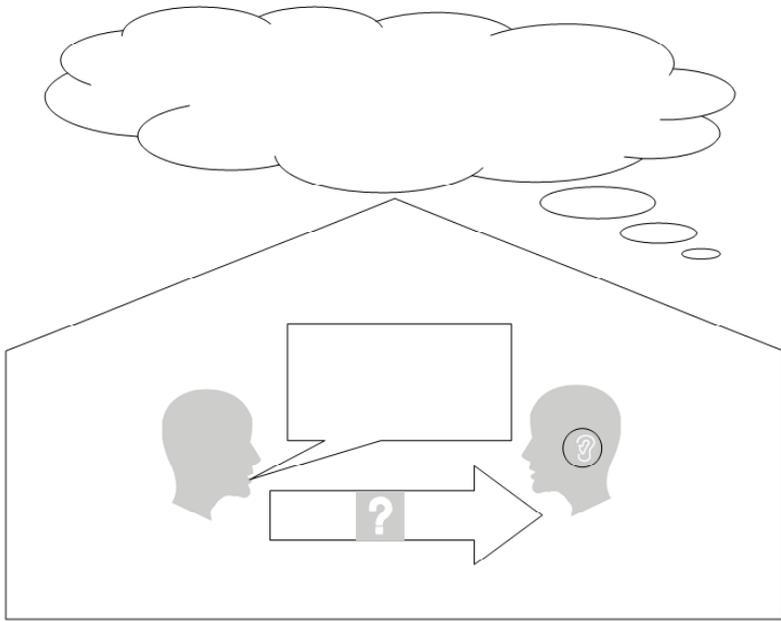


Figure 6: *Sample Speaker-Hearer Graphic Organizer*

The Declaration of Independence, despite being an extremely familiar document, retains some of the interpretive uncertainties of other documents. While historians know that the main author was Thomas Jefferson, the final text was the product of two subsequent revisions—one by the so-called Committee of Five and the other by the Committee of the Whole (the Second Continental Congress meeting in special session)—whose reasoning for modifying Jefferson’s draft is not always clear to us. No good records of either revision process exist.⁵⁶ Additionally, the original hearers are uncertain. Certainly, it was addressed to a variety of audiences, but who was the primary audience? Anxious patriots? Uncommitted colonists? Potential allies like France? Europeans in general?⁵⁷ What “code” did Jefferson employ, to use Jakobson’s terminology? Is this, for example, a legal document, designed to be taken seriously as international law?⁵⁸ Finally, while historians know much of the context in which Jefferson wrote, some of his “situation” remains lost. Pauline Maier has pointed out that many of the complaints of British abuse that Jefferson lists are too obscure to attach to particular historical circumstances.⁵⁹ Given these uncertainties, it is not surprising that the Declaration has been understood in a number of ways by historians. In the “explanation” step, for example, historians have disagreed

about the number of stages in the logical argument.⁶⁰ Given the nature of the hermeneutical circle, it is not surprising that disagreement about the analysis of the parts will lead to disagreement about final “comprehension” of the document. Perhaps most significantly, the Declaration exemplifies Ricoeur’s argument that a text can escape the meaning of its author(s). In this case, the “new horizons” opened by the soaring language and idealism of the text have led to many appropriations of the text that clearly went beyond anything Jefferson or the others had in mind originally. To take the most famous of many examples, Pauline Maier has explained that Abraham Lincoln “saw the Declaration of Independence’s statements on equality and rights as setting a standard for the future, one that demanded the gradual extinction of conflicting practices as that became possible.” He understood the authors of the Declaration to have meant:

Simply to declare the right so that the enforcement of it might follow as fast as the circumstances should permit. They meant to set up a standard maxim for free men which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, and constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere.⁶¹

A Model Methodology for Teaching Primary Sources

I would like to propose a coherent methodology for the teaching of primary sources in a year-long middle or high school course that introduces students to ideas and techniques incrementally and systematically. Employing this framework in the classroom could substantially improve students’ view of documents and their use of them in argument and writing.

Conceptual framework. Early in the school year, teachers could introduce the conceptual framework for understanding primary sources. In my own teaching, after introducing the visuals depicted above, I suggested to students the challenges of a reading document versus listening to someone speaking. Taking my cue from Ricoeur’s distinction between speech and writing, I asked students to imagine listening to a conversation between two people in the same room and trying to understand what was being said. Then, I offered a modified scenario—one that represents reading a primary source. I asked students to imagine being in the same room when someone is on the phone. The students do not know who is on the other end of the phone line and can only speculate as they listen to the speaker on their end. They might try several guesses and then test them as the conversation continues. To further complicate things, I then asked students to imagine that all they had was a written transcription of the one side of the phone

call—in which case they could no longer observe physical clues, audio variations, etc. Given these difficulties, I tried to encourage students to view interpreting primary sources as an active, imaginative “reconstruction” of the text based on the limited clues at their disposal. This required that I allow some room for speculations that might be wide of the mark, while encouraging students to test those speculations by the text itself.

Selection of documents. Teachers should choose documents that strategically support the larger questions and concepts they plan to address in a particular unit. This will ensure that primary sources are well-integrated with other learning activities and that the time invested in interpreting sources supports the learning of content as well. They should also select documents in which authorship is obvious and significant, and/or the point of view makes a notable difference in how the document is read. Often, pairing opposing documents is the easiest way for students to see contrasting points of view. Strategic use of documents with complicated source information helps: someone under oath, a person recalling an event long after it occurred, a former member of a group evaluating the group’s performance, an individual with a strained relationship to his or her audience, etc. As the year progresses, the teacher can select subtler documents and expect students to draw out the significance of source information on their own. It is important to emphasize with students that their inferences about the motive or reliability of authors based on brief source information are just that—inferences subject to clarification or revision as more information comes to light. Short of such information, their conclusions must be seen as tentative.

Guided understanding. Early in the year, in examining particular documents, teachers can work closely with the entire class. They should model reading large portions of a document, or even the entire document, using the “think-aloud” protocol⁶² employed to great effect on the *Historical Thinking Matters* website.⁶³ For modeling to be effective, teachers might ask students to pay attention to what the teacher hypothesizes and why he or she makes particular conclusions. Teachers might also provide students with a text-based version of their think-aloud comments using the mark-up language tools available in word processing software.⁶⁴ After modeling the reading of a few documents, teachers could engage the entire class in an analytical reading of some sources. As the year progresses and students gain the confidence and skills to analyze as a class, they will be able to make sense of the documents in pairs or groups.

Pre-reading. Teachers can display the speaker-hearer illustration or some other graphic to remind students that documents function as substitutes for speech. They can remind students to ask “What is the text doing?” Instructors begin by noting whatever information the editor provides about the

document regarding the author, historical background, etc., then ask students to brainstorm other information they know about the author, era, and so forth. This is relatively easy, since teachers usually choose documents to illustrate concepts they have already taught more broadly. They can ask students how this information might influence their understanding of the document. For example, teachers might consider the ways they can show students how audience influences the content of communication by asking, “When you call your mom and talk about ‘X,’ how is it different from when you talk to your friend? Why?” Teachers can encourage their students to construct a tentative idea about what the text is doing. Though most teachers spend very little time on this step, it is arguably the most crucial one. When students reflect on the author and context of the document, they begin to form their first ideas of the function of the text. At the beginning of the year, pre-reading the text and predicting what the author may say could well take more class time than actually reading the document itself.

Critical Reading. If time permits, the class can read the text all the way through once without comment to get a sense of its general content and structure and to see how well the initial idea, formed in pre-reading, bears up. Students could do this silently, though it may be helpful for teachers to read aloud with proper pronunciation, pauses, and emphases. Then, instructors can move on to a critical reading of the text in which students look for sequence (through enumerative words), logical argumentation (arguments, appeals to reason, etc.), tone (including evocative or emotional words), and/or evidence of a relationship between the author and audience. As students answer questions, the teacher should regularly ask how this information changes their understanding of the document or how it helps them better understand “what the document is doing.” The key to successful reading of texts lies with the teacher’s dogged use of follow-up questions about *what to do with* the information the class uncovers: “So how does it help you to understand this document better by knowing the author?” or “How do you read it differently from how you would if it were anonymous?” Too often, teachers do not probe students enough to get them to consider how all the information they have uncovered shapes their reading of a document.

Summary. It is useful to have students return to their initial hypothesis about the meaning of the text and to compare it with their fuller, post-analysis understanding. They should summarize their understanding of the function of the text verbally or in writing. Students should have to articulate some kind of summary to determine whether they genuinely understand. This is why a written summary may be preferable to a verbal explanation: students are often more precise and self-reflective when given an opportunity to write their answer.

Conclusion

Intentionally complicating students' notions of primary sources serves an important instructional purpose. According to cognitive approaches to learning, an epistemological shift needs to take place for students to think differently. Otherwise, they simply assimilate new information into existing schema. In teaching documents, students' naïve, pre-critical views need to be shaken up. For this to take place, it is necessary, first, for the teacher to practice often. Reshaping students' thinking is at least as difficult as getting a person physically fit. Second, teachers must provide conceptual support to enable students to view primary sources differently than they typically do. The graphic representation referred to above is one example. A linear series of questions is less effective, as it tends to encourage students to persist in reading texts for simple reading comprehension. Instead, teachers should disrupt their traditional reading practice and get them to think about texts as written communicative acts. Inasmuch as teachers provide a "bridge" between student understanding and more skilled reading, the first discussions of speech and/or texts should probably begin with contemporary examples from students' own frame of reference and then move into historical documents. Another key support is for the classroom teacher to regularly model active questioning of the text. Though this is certainly not the only valid way to help pre-service teachers develop an epistemology of text, it is a potentially effective one. I hope that it provides a point of departure for history-social science teacher preparation programs and/or professional development programs geared toward history teachers to be aware of the need to teach a discipline-specific epistemology of text to teachers, who may in turn teach such a model to students.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Robert B. Bain of the University of Michigan for many conversations that have helped shape and clarify my understanding of the theory and practice of teaching. I would also like to thank Bain and Patricia Cleary of California State University, Long Beach for helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.
2. See David Pace and Joan Middendorf, eds., *Decoding the Disciplines: Helping Students Learn Disciplinary Ways of Thinking* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 1-2 for references.
3. See Samuel S. Wineburg, "On the Reading of Historical Texts: Notes on the Breach Between School and Academy," *American Educational Research Journal* 28, no.

3 (Fall 1991): 495-519. This article was reprinted in Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001).

4. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking*, 75-79.

5. Robert B. Bain, "Into the Breach: Using Research and Theory to Shape History Instruction," in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

6. See NARA primary source analysis worksheets at <<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/index.html>>.

7. See Richard J. Paxton, "A Deafening Silence: History Textbooks and Students Who Read Them," *Review of Educational Research* 69, no. 3 (Fall 1999), especially pp. 332-333.

8. For example, Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) argues for the irrelevance of the author in understanding a text. Though Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rainbow (New York: Pantheon, 1984) disagrees with Barthes on some points, he ultimately endorses a view of the author that largely agrees with that of Barthes.

9. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Judge and the Historian* (London, U.K.: Verso, 1999), 16-17.

10. Bruce VanSledright, *In Search of America's Past: Learning to Read History in Elementary School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002), 4, 38, 69, 74, 76, 139. These words are all used in the context of referring to Barthes.

11. *Ibid.*, 4.

12. While I claim no expertise in this field, there is a small but growing literature on critical realism that addresses the natural and social sciences. See Roy Bhaskar, ed. *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

13. This is described in much more poetic form by Anthony C. Thiselton: "Between the Scylla of Mechanical Replication and the Charybdis of Orphaned Indeterminacy" and Thiselton, "Communicative Action and Promise in Interdisciplinary, Biblical, and Theological Hermeneutics," in *The Promise of Hermeneutics*, ed. Roger Lundin, Clarence Walkout, and Anthony C. Thiselton (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 137.

14. This articulation of "critical realism" is indebted to N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), which is in turn adapted from Ben Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (Alison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1989).

15. Wright, *The New Testament*, 36.

16. A second implication from this anecdote is related to Neusner's apparently favorable reaction to Wineburg's lack of understanding of the purpose of the Genesis text. A stance of humility before the text—genuinely listening to it and probing it—is the appropriate one.

17. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking*, 65.

18. The website *Historical Thinking Matters*, <<http://www.historicalthinkingmatters.org/>>, provides helpful demonstrations of historians modeling the sophisticated reading of primary sources through an adaptation of the think-aloud protocol. Wineburg credits K. Anders Ericsson and Herbert A. Simon, *Protocol Analysis: Verbal Reports of Data* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1984) and Michael Pressley and Peter Afflerbach, *Verbal Reports of Reading: The Nature of Constructively Responsive Reading* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995), 84, n. 4.

19. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking*, 9, 14, 21, respectively.

20. Ibid., 65, 69.
21. Ibid., 65, 69, 76.
22. This is what Wineburg pinpoints when he describes the result of reading primary sources for even bright, engaged readers. Referring to his exemplary student Derek, Wineburg says, "These documents did not spur Derek to ask himself new questions or consider new dimensions of human experience. Instead, his existing beliefs shaped the information he encountered so that the new conformed to the shape of the already known. Derek read these documents but he learned little from them" (*Historical Thinking*, 9).
23. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (New York: The Modern Library, 1954), 24.
24. Ibid., 25.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Of course, the audience of either a rhetorical address or a primary source is rarely identified explicitly, so that determining the audience usually requires inferring it from the text to begin with. There is no escaping this circularity. One can only continue to test the speculations derived initially from the text against the text itself in the "hermeneutical circle."
28. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 739-740.
29. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking*, 65.
30. David Armitage, "The Declaration of Independence and International Law," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series 59, no. 1 (January 2002): 43.
31. John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).
32. John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1969).
33. Austin, 6.
34. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 73.
35. Austin, 8, emphasis in original.
36. Searle, 136-141.
37. Indeed, biblical scholars have fruitfully applied these techniques to make sense of texts that are by definition historical, whatever else they may be. See, for example, Anthony C. Thiselton, "Communicative Action" in Kevin Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture, and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002) 159-204.
38. Austin, 99.
39. Ibid., 98-99.
40. Searle, 25, emphasis in original. Searle is here summarizing the argument of John L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*.
41. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 18.
42. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking*, 69.
43. Armitage, "Declaration of Independence," 46, emphasis in original.
44. For the purposes of this paper, I will confine my comments to his *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, a brief, systematic, relatively readable synthesis of many of his earlier arguments. Ricoeur refers (26) to Jakobson's "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. T. A. Sebeok (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1960), 350-377.
45. Ibid., 33.

46. Ibid., 26.

47. Ibid., 28.

48. Ibid., 27.

49. Ibid., 30.

50. Ricoeur explicitly rejected attempts to remove the author altogether. Instead, he argued that the intent was largely inscribed in the text itself, and that interpretation involves a dialectic between the meaning of the text and the intent of the author. To reject either pole was to embrace a fallacy. The “intentional fallacy” holds that the author’s intention is the only criterion for interpretation. Conversely, he describes the “fallacy of the text” as “the fallacy of hypostatizing the text as an authorless entity.” This fallacy “forgets that a text remains a discourse told by somebody, said by someone to someone else about something. It is impossible to cancel out this main characteristic of discourse without reducing texts to natural objects, i.e., to things which are not man-made, but which, like pebbles, are found in the sand” (30). I do think, however, that Ricoeur may dichotomize the difference between speech and text too starkly, ignoring the range of ways in which the author of a text might be relatively accessible or inaccessible. For example, texts written recently, in which the author shares her/his current readers’ cultural and historical backgrounds (and in which the author is still alive to clarify her/his own meaning) are presumably much more closely tied to their authors than texts written longer ago, in a different historical context, etc.

51. Ricoeur, 17.

52. Ibid., 76.

53. Ibid., 34-35.

54. According to Ricoeur, this is the stage where the structural analyses of Saussure and Levi-Strauss might be useful.

55. Ricoeur, 75-88.

56. See Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 97-153.

57. “Disagreements about the Declaration’s sources and character has created confusion about its original purpose, whether as a text for internal consumption; as the enactment of Independence itself or the justification for Independence after the fact; as a contingent and strategic document or as a universal statement of ‘self-evident truths’ regarding the ‘inalienable rights’ of all human beings.” (Armitage, 42).

58. As Armitage ultimately argues (Ibid.).

59. Maier comments that many of the charges against the Crown in the opening section of the Declaration had “played a relatively inconspicuous part in the imperial controversy, which is why the Declaration left observers, then and now, scrambling to figure out what it was talking about.” (115)

60. Armitage contrasts his own analysis of the structure with an earlier one by Donald S. Lutz, “The Declaration of Independence as Part of an American National Compact,” *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 19, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 41-58.

61. Maier, 205-206.

62. K. Anders Ericsson and Herbert A. Simon, *Protocol Analysis: Verbal Reports of Data* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1984) and Michael Pressley and Peter Afflerbach, *Verbal Reports of Reading: The Nature of Constructively Responsive Reading* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1995).

63. *Historical Thinking Matters*, <<http://www.historicalthinkingmatters.org/>>.

64. I am indebted to my colleague, Nicole Gilbertson, Site Director of the University of California, Irvine History Project, for this suggestion.



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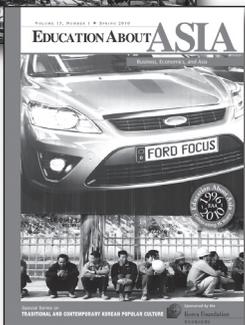
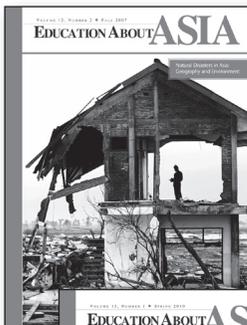
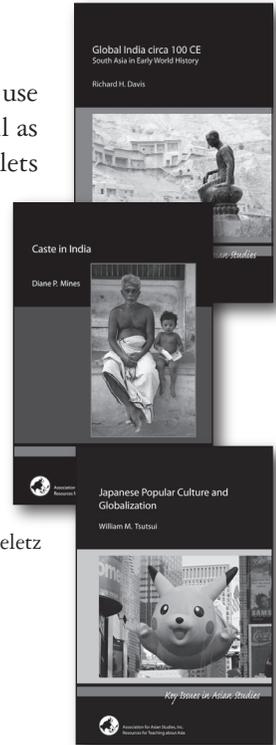
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