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A Time for Change: Transforming a New Generation  
Of Students into Historical Thinkers

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The history teaching profession has long been criticized for promoting an unwavering procession of educators who emphasize lectures, note-taking, worksheets, and recitation. This way of teaching, while practiced in many classrooms, is being challenged by teachers who view their classrooms as a history laboratory where students and teachers co-investigate the past by analyzing primary and secondary sources. Due to the excellent teacher preparation at many universities across the country, a new generation of history teachers encourages their students to discuss sources, ask questions of sources, and write about the past using practices of historians. Moreover, this new generation of history teachers promotes historical thinking rather than general models of thinking. Teaching students how to think historically will make them not only more knowledgeable about the past but will help them come to a greater understanding of the world around them.

Recent efforts on the part of history educators have assisted teachers towards the aim of helping students learn to think historically. From the outset of my essay, I maintain there is a way to improve inquiring about the past and practicing the discipline of history through a method called the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>-Order documents approach.<sup>1</sup> This approach helps new and experienced teachers go beyond the textbook and facilitates students to make history more personal to them. The approach recognizes multiple narratives, emphasizes thematic teaching and historical inquiry, and stresses teachers and students practicing the discipline of history.<sup>2</sup> Before describing this approach, I offer a summary of the importance of historical thinking.

In his book *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, Stanford University professor Sam Wineburg argues that domain-specific thinking needs to be emphasized over general models of thinking.<sup>3</sup> Critical thinking, while important, is unable to fulfill the

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick D. Drake and Sarah Drake Brown, "A Systematic Approach to Improve Students' Historical Thinking," *The History Teacher* 36, no. 4 (August 2003): 465-489 and Frederick D. Drake and Lynn R. Nelson, *Engagement in Teaching History: Theory and Practices for Middle and Secondary Teachers* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc., 2009), 138-155.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).



requirements necessary to examine and understand primary sources. It takes a teacher who thinks historically to engage students in this discipline-specific way of thinking. Sam Wineburg, Professor of Education and Professor of History at Stanford University and Director of the Stanford History Education Group, encourages history teachers to stress historical thinking. Over the past two decades, Wineburg has studied *how* history students and professional historians think differently when given primary sources. To set up his experiments he gave high school students and historians the same set of primary sources and asked them to “think aloud” as they examined eight sources. Students, even those who scored 4s and 5s on AP history exams, tend to treat primary sources as if they are all equal. For example, when given the eight sources at one time, most students regard the primary sources as offering equal information. Indeed, students do not organize a set of primary sources chronologically, thematically, or in order of importance. Furthermore, according to Wineburg, most students do not ask questions of primary sources. Rarely, do they question the intent of authors. Most students seldom ask when the document was written or the intended audience. Thus, the students’ perspective is that the purpose of primary sources is solely to find and gather information. Wineburg concluded that “students may have ‘processed texts,’ but they failed to engage with them.”<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, when Wineburg observed historians examining the same primary sources as students he found their approach to be vastly different. Historians organize primary sources, often in chronological order or thematically, and they ask questions of the sources to place them in context of the world at the time. Much of what historians do is an unconscious behavior and Wineburg was able to reveal historians’ practices by asking them to “think aloud.” For example, when historians read a primary source they do not read for content understanding immediately. Instead, historians “source heuristic,” or question who the author is, when the source was written, and who the intended audience was. Additionally, as historians think aloud, they “corroborate heuristic,” or talk to themselves asking questions that seek important agreements and disagreements among primary sources. Wineburg identifies this “close reading” of documents as an important attribute of historians that students should have. He urges teachers to involve their students in this “close reading” whereby the history teacher and students consider what the document says and together they examine the language used to express it.

Wineburg calls upon teachers to teach their students how to “source heuristic” and he encourages teachers to stress “corroboration heuristic” *among* multiple sources. He also calls upon teachers to ask students to seek both what has been included in the document as well as what has been omitted from a document. In essence, Wineburg calls for teachers

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 76.



to emphasize “reading the silences.” Sam Wineburg has worked for years emphasizing to history teachers everywhere the importance of historical thinking in the classroom. The goal of Wineburg’s work, *Historical Thinking*, is to “show that historical thinking, in its deepest forms, is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development.”<sup>5</sup> Essentially, individuals are not born with the capability to think historically so it has to be taught. Several sources can help us as teachers, including The Stanford History Education Group website, chapter 2 of the National History Standards (which emphasizes the five types of historical thinking), and Peter Seixas’ six “Benchmarks for Historical Thinking.”<sup>6</sup> My essay focuses on the approach of Frederick Drake and his co-authors Sarah Drake Brown, and Lynn R. Nelson.<sup>7</sup>

In a recent book, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century*, Canadian history educator Stephane Levesque has pulled together the work of several history educators who emphasize historical thinking. He encourages teachers to look to the “works of Husbands, Lee, VanSledright, and Drake and Brown.”<sup>8</sup> Levesque points out three approaches that have emerged from recent studies in history education: narrative, thematic, and contemporary. He cites three works as contributing, notably, to help teachers and students look at the “inside” and “outside” of events. The first is the U.S. National History Standards, which emphasizes helping students create “their own narrative understanding of past events.” The second recommends that teachers discuss “the concepts of continuity and change by identifying what Drake and Nelson refer to as ‘key turning points without reducing history to earthquakes of change.’” Levesque writes,

Instead of covering the collective past with a master narrative, Drake and Nelson suggest, teachers and students should select and analyze key events of larger phenomena thematically (e.g., the U.S. Declaration of Independence) so as to reveal patterns of historical duration (e.g., democracy, self-government) and succession (e.g., from slavery to civil rights). By doing so, it becomes possible to discuss rapid changes that a society can undergo in certain aspects of life. Similarly, with this approach,

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>6</sup> See <<http://www.shed.stanford.edu/>>, National Center for History in the Schools, *National Standards for History: Basic Edition* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), 59-72; and <http://www.histori.ca/benchmarks/>.

<sup>7</sup> All three have Midwestern connections. Drake is Professor Emeritus of History at Illinois State University and a former executive director of the ICSS. Brown is the assistant professor of history and director of the history-social sciences education program at Ball State University. Nelson will be retiring this spring as an associate professor of social studies education at Purdue University.

<sup>8</sup> Stephane Levesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 131-32.



students are led to study certain significant actions during periods that may initially appear stable and continuous to them but may reveal more social changes than expected, if examined thematically.<sup>9</sup>

A third approach, that of Canadian educator Peter Seixas, adds to the thematic approach by calling upon teachers to “make explicit use of the relation between the present and the past to discuss elements of continuity and change.”<sup>10</sup> Each approach, Levesque keenly observes, can be used separately, but often are used simultaneously depending on the perspectives, goals, and awareness of teachers. For my essay, I emphasize the Drake, Brown, and Nelson approach.

The study of primary and secondary sources is a must in the history laboratory setting. It is imperative for students to understand how historical figures thought and acted at a particular time and place, helping them to understand why different decisions were made, and to examine the “inside” and “outside” of an event. Frederick D. Drake’s 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup>-Order approach is a method of source analysis that helps teachers to organize historical content around a narrative/theme. It calls upon the teacher to pose for students a thesis and for students and teacher to examine primary sources that support and challenge the thesis. This approach requires the teacher to build an intellectual direction that joins historical content and pedagogy in a co-investigation of the past. Students discuss the relationship of sources through deliberation. The 1<sup>st</sup>-Order document is the source which a teacher “cannot live without.” It is a “core document” and a source at the “epicenter” of a historical issue. The attributes of a First-Order document include: it should establish a clear position, draw upon students’ prior knowledge, be age-appropriate, be edited for pedagogical convenience, and encourage deliberation and decision-making among students.

The 1<sup>st</sup>-Order document is surrounded by three to five 2<sup>nd</sup>-Order documents that challenge and support the position of the core document. It is vitally important that at least one of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-Order documents challenges the 1<sup>st</sup>-Order document. And it is important that at least one of the documents is non-textual (e.g., a picture, map, or graph). While teacher and students investigate the sources put together as 1<sup>st</sup>- and 2<sup>nd</sup>-Order documents, they must apply their discussion to a central question that the teacher creates. This teacher-crafted central question should be open-ended, it should invite deliberation, and it should invite interpretation of the past. Drake suggests the design of the question (usually posed as a “How” or “Why” question or phrased as “To what extent...?”) should

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



occur as the teacher thinks about the intellectual direction of their lesson with students. The act of selecting 1<sup>st</sup>- and 2<sup>nd</sup>-Order documents, Drake and Brown point out, is an act of interpretation on the part of the teacher. The question encourages teachers and students to interpret the 1<sup>st</sup>- and 2<sup>nd</sup>-Order documents.

As the teacher and their students probe the sources, students hold the responsibility for additional investigation and finding a 3<sup>rd</sup>-Order source. The 3<sup>rd</sup>-Order source is a source a student finds and selects that either challenges or support the 1<sup>st</sup>-Order document. The 3<sup>rd</sup>-Order source is absolutely essential. When students determine a 3<sup>rd</sup>-Order source they are using their skills for historical research. They are demonstrating their abilities to relate sources *and* to relate the ideas embedded in sources. The 3<sup>rd</sup>-Order source gives students an opportunity to “own” a source and to “own” historical content. Because the 3<sup>rd</sup>-Order source is something they have brought to the history laboratory, students have become partners in investigating a historical issue and are engaged in the nature of doing history. Students defend their selection of a 3<sup>rd</sup>-Order source and relate their source to a 1<sup>st</sup>-Order document. Students listen respectfully to the position of their colleagues before responding.<sup>11</sup> The 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup>-Order approach invites discussion in the history laboratory, and it affords an opportunity for students to challenge (through their 3<sup>rd</sup>-Order source) the narrative/theme of teacher, textbook, or other secondary source. It invites an immersion into the past, and it encourages students to become involved in historical comprehension, analysis and interpretation, and decision-making-types of historical thinking described in the U.S. National History Standards.

I offer an example that has been beneficial in my brief experiences in teaching and encourages historical thinking for middle school students. My 1<sup>st</sup>-Order source is the Emancipation Proclamation, which provided a moral compass for the eventual direction emancipation would take. 2<sup>nd</sup>-Order sources that support or challenge the 1<sup>st</sup>-Order source are a picture of a slave with deep-searing scars, an ad for the capture of a runaway slave, a speech written by abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, and South Carolina Declarations for Secession (December 20, 1860). 3<sup>rd</sup>-Order sources found by students include a photograph of Augustus Saint-Gauden’s bronze relief-the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial and his black volunteers carrying canteens, knapsacks, and muskets projected upward at angles with young and middle-aged soldiers displaying dignity and determination as they marched toward their fate-and a recent newspaper article about reparations paid to the family of slaves. I find students gain ownership of the information when they are engaged

<sup>11</sup> Frederick D. Drake and Sarah Drake Brown, “A Systematic Approach to Improve Students’ Historical Thinking,” 465-489 and Frederick D. Drake and Lynn R. Nelson, *Engagement in Teaching History*, 142-145.



in studying the events of both yesterday and today and that history has more meaning to students when they bring sources that relate to my core, 1<sup>st</sup>-Order document-the Emancipation Proclamation. For my central question, I ask “How should we remember the memory of the Civil War?” In an era of standardized testing and Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), teachers have to take the time to pick and choose which information in the curriculum they find to be most important for students’ understanding. The 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>-Order approach offers the teacher and their students an opportunity to probe the past in an investigative way, to challenge narratives through themes, and to understand more deeply continuity and change.

A new generation of history teachers is focusing on how to *do* history. This entails teaching students how to think historically and how to read and write about the past. The prolific writer David McCullough once said, “A nation that forgets its past can function no better than an individual with amnesia.” His words ring as a pleasant reminder to all of us. McCullough, an advocate of telling stories about the founding generation, is a gifted craftsman of the grand narrative. But there is more to *teaching* history than telling stories. We need to introduce our students to multiple narratives and primary sources and to “do” history. A new generation of history teachers is willing to take up the call, to help us overcome historical amnesia, and to encourage historical thinking in our classrooms.



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