

Collin M. Barnes
November 8, 2008
Professor Boerman-Cornell
ED 311
Reading Historically

“History”. If this word is muttered to the average high school student, it is usually received with cringing and shudders of disgust because they often associate history with reading and regurgitating facts that they must memorize from a boorish lecture given by their teacher. However, this does not have to be the case. Students always remember the teachers that made their subject area fun and exciting, and no subject has more potential for this than history. What usually turns people off from history is the aspect of reading. Yet, if we teach them to read in an exciting way, the class itself will be more exciting and the students will retain the information for years to come. Reading historically is significantly different than reading in other subject areas which is clearly shown through multiple interviews with people related to teaching and learning history. Based on this information, I have researched and found several ways of teaching students to read historical documents and retain that information for future use.

First of all, one must ask the question, “What is specific about reading historically?” I interviewed a History Professor from Trinity Christian College, a high school teacher from Soap Lake High School, and a student interested in history from Ephrata High School in order to answer this question. With Dr. Rice (the professor of history), I simply wanted to find out *how* he read and what went through his mind while he was reading. First, he said that he always looked for specifics within the texts. He wanted to make sure he knew exactly what time period the document was talking about, and also what time period the document was written in. If the time periods were too

expansive, he made sure that the sources used were credible and that the information was accurate. He also mentioned that it is important to try to discern the intelligence of the author his/herself. Even if the sources are credible, if the author misinterprets them, they could lead to false conclusions and skew the outlook of the event altogether. Although looking for specifics is not limited only to history, the *way* in which an historian looks for them is different from other content areas. In English, it is important to look for specifics, but often times the author is writing a fictional novel in which most facts are either imagined or are not the essential point of the work. In history, however, one misguided fact can change the entire outlook on the event itself.

Second, Dr. Rice noted that it is *imperative* that readers distinguish the bias of the author early in the reading. He gave some helpful advice for spotting a bias *within* a reading like any strong language for or against anything specific within the text, focusing more on one point than others, or saying outright that one view is better than another. As for the author his/herself, it is important to note their credentials, where they are from and their occupation. If a vast majority of an author's monetary support is coming from a specific company, they will be more inclined (if not forced) to gear their argument in a way that shows favor to this company or group. This also ties in to their occupation and where they are from. If an historian were raised, for example, in the 1960s when a common mindset was that African Americans were lower than white Americans on the hierarchical scale, then their works would probably negatively reflect any mention of African Americans in history. An author's bias can be a dangerous thing to an inexperienced reader trying to research a certain topic in history. That is why it is absolutely *essential* that students, especially those learning history, are taught how to

distinguish between biases. In a journal article, Bruce VanSledright discusses the importance of bias found in historical fiction novels when he writes:

The early indications suggested that some students who read historical fiction accounts regularly, but who were without the benefit of being taught to distinguish between different types of historical texts and possible author purposes and varying frames of reference, conflated the dramatic narrative *form* of the fictional accounts with the *content* of history. In other words, these students tended to think that if historical accounts were dramatic and built around narrative forms, then they were history, without much regard to the accepted evidence-use conventions employed in the historical profession. (VanSledright, 1997, p.3)

Every author has a bias, whether it is intentional or not. This excerpt refers to biases found in historical fiction novels, but can pertain to non-fiction works as well. If students are not taught to discover the bias, they could be substituting fiction for fact. By helping students distinguish the biases of historical authors from factual information, they will learn the vast importance of finding a bias and can carry that information over to other content areas.

Another thing that Dr. Rice mentioned in our interview was one major thing that separates history reading from the other content areas. He mentioned that it is extremely important while reading to try and relate the text to what is happening in the world today. He said that the world, for the most part, is interconnected, and that one thing impacts another, which impacts another. This trend can be followed from some major event that happened in the Medieval Era and has somehow impacted a particular way that we live

today. It is always important not only to look back, but also to look at the impact of the event on the present. This also helps when studying other parts of history because, oftentimes, events in one part of the world will play a role in completely separate events in other parts of the world. This helps us when looking at historical documents studied in other content areas like English or the sciences. One person's writings or discoveries could greatly impact the work of another. It is important to look at *both* works to find similarities and differences to see where improvement was made and what has yet to be accomplished.

After interviewing Dr. Rice, I interviewed a current history teacher from Soap Lake High School located in Soap Lake, Washington named Mary Cardwell. Her views on reading in history were significantly different than the views expressed by Dr. Rice. The first thing she noted was that reading history can be extremely overwhelming if a person is not used to the writing styles used by the author. In this sense, reading historically is very similar to reading in other subject areas. If a person does not know the terms used by people in that particular domain, they will often feel confused or left out until somebody explains to them the meaning of the words. That is why Cardwell stated that, in her class, she likes to take the documents in smaller chunks, and then put them together later on. She will have the class read the texts (either alone, out loud, or with a partner), then stop and discuss aloud what they think is happening, the importance of the event, the different biases, and answer any questions that the students might have. Once she is confident that the students have a firm grasp on the document, she will have them continue reading. This allows the students time to stop, regroup their thoughts, and start on the document feeling semi-refreshed. This action is not necessarily a unique idea

and applicable only toward history, but it does have a greater affect on reading historical documents than other pieces of work. In many subjects, the point is to find a groove while reading and engross oneself to the point that he/she feels like they are a part of the plot. Or, in other subjects, it is important to get through the entire text to grasp the main idea, then go back and look at each step as an individual. This is typically not the case when reading historically. Word usage, language, and bias can make a document very difficult to read, Cardwell noted, and so it is important to go only a few steps at a time to keep the students from getting overwhelmed with information. She also stressed that it is important to take it slowly so she can talk about the biases and arguments as they arise.

Cardwell also noted, just like Dr. Rice, that it is important to relate things found in history to events happening in the world today. However, while Dr. Rice found it important because certain trends can be traced this way (which Cardwell agreed with), Cardwell said it was important because it helped the students to keep motivated and to change the outlook on history from a bleak and boorish topic to one of extreme interest. This is one obstacle that history teachers have to overcome that many other subjects do not. More than anything else, history teachers must overcome this mindset. Relating things that happened in history to events in the present day gives students a chance to realize that just because something happened in the past, does not mean that it is completely over and forgotten. History has a tendency of repeating itself, and many dilemmas today can be solved by looking into the past experiences of others. "History is always in the making," Cardwell said, "and it is our job to help the students look around and find it."

The final interview I conducted was with a current high school student at Ephrata High School named Derek Bessett. Derek is interested in history more than other subjects, yet when it came to *reading* history, he had some rather outspoken opinions. I began by simply asking him how reading historical documents was different than reading documents from other domains. He stated that they are typically more boring to read than other texts, and they can be extremely confusing at times. Derek stated this mostly because of the difference between the language used today and the languages used in the past. He said that it could be extremely frustrating trying to figure out what exactly the author is talking about when the language doesn't even seem to relate. This is not a unique answer when asking about the main complaint that students have about reading history texts or even the subject of history itself. It is extremely uncomfortable for many of them because they were not taught how to understand the differences between the languages, and they generally get a bleak outlook on the subject as a whole.

When I asked Derek what sources he geared his complaints toward mostly, he said that reading primary sources was confusing, but that reading the textbooks were even worse. Herein lies his main complaint. He said that he feels overwhelmed because he gets completely bombarded with information from a poorly written book, and he is then expected to simply spew this information back on an equally overwhelming test. He said that he had a hard time retaining this information because his mind would wander when he read the textbook because it was so poorly written, but he still *had* to read it anyway. The fact that the teachers *force* their students to read these poorly written works, for the most part, does nothing but turn students away from enjoying the subject of history. Granted, there is no denying that textbooks can be a good tool for the teachers to use

when structuring the class, but making students constantly read these substandard texts simply turns students away from the teacher's main goal of having the students learn about and enjoy the past.

The fact that students (like Derek) view history as a boring and outdated has become a real problem over the last several decades. Many students tend to go more toward reading works for their English classes because they are actually interesting and are written in such a way that they will be remembered throughout the ages. They grasp the reader's attention, and hold it throughout the novel or work until the very end. This is something that most history texts do not do. Derek even supported this idea when he said that he "enjoy[s] history, but the reading is so boring. I'm actually beginning to like my American Literature class a lot more simply because of the novels we are reading." Many students go into a history class assuming that it is going to be boring, and the readings that are assigned do nothing except support this argument. As a teacher, I would attempt to counter this attitude by using suggestions put forth by Cardwell and Dr. Rice. I would break the text into chunks and talk about it as we went along in an attempt to keep the students from getting overwhelmed.

During our interview, Derek stated something absolutely profound. He, although he is interested in history, said, "I get so confused while I'm reading that I really don't even know if I want to continue taking as many history classes as I am now." This completely took me by surprise, and although I know the importance of studying history, I felt a need to research it further. Sam Wineburg offers insight into reading historically when he writes, "Achieving mature historical thought depends precisely on our ability to navigate the uneven landscape of history, to traverse the rugged terrain that lies between

the poles of familiarity and distance from the past” (Wineburg 5). If we, as teachers, cannot help our students navigate this difficult terrain, they will lose interest in history simply because it is confusing to them. This is something that is extremely discomfoting, and I have found several methods that I believe will help me teach my students to understand history better.

Reading historical works can be quite a chore, and there is no end to the complaints that students have concerning this. However, there are several things that can be done to change the mindset that reading is boring and outdated to one where the students look forward to reading about history and would choose this subject over any other. The first thing that would have to change is the mindset of the teachers. Through my interviews with Dr. Rice, Mary Cardwell, and conversations with other history teachers I have found out that many history teachers admit that they do not help students get excited about reading historical texts. Although every one of them is a good teacher and they love their subject area, they often don’t realize that some people are not as interested in it as they are. This should be brought to their attention so that they can change lesson plans in such a way that the students will be able to understand the content and enjoy what they are doing. Although it will not be easy, if teachers are more aware of their teaching and reading practices, a vast amount of change can be made almost immediately.

The second thing that should be addressed to help students read historical works is to take the emphasis off of textbooks. In my opinion, the teacher should use textbooks for structuring the class and occasionally having the students read parts of it for general

information, but the emphasis should not be put on their everyday use. Mary Cardwell noted this in our interview when she said, “textbooks are good tools, but should not be the backbone of the class. I try to find a good mixture of both textbook readings and trade book readings.” Essentially, by finding a mixture, Cardwell hoped to give her students cold hard facts from the textbook, but then to also give them an alternative or in-depth view of the subject by having them read a more interesting and exciting account through a trade book. She realizes the importance of textbooks, but knows that if she wants to keep her students interested in history, she has to find alternate means of education.

One of the main complaints about textbooks is that, simply put, they are poorly written works. Most of the time, the authors are not experienced writers (or even experienced historians sometimes), but are people that textbook companies can hire for relatively cheap and produce a work that is not full of false information. The authors must get a certain word count typically, so their writing is not based on how much information they think is important, but on how much they can put within a certain amount of space. This often ends with a poorly constructed (and sometimes not entirely true) book that schools must pay thousands of dollars to use. Bruce VanSledright wrote in a peer-reviewed journal the advantages of trade books over textbooks when he wrote:

The authors and publishers of these alternative historical texts have not worried about word counts and readability formulas per se; they have attempted to construct compelling and seductive, yet reasonably accurate history books that can augment the traditional market. The commercial success of these alternative texts has spurred some to construct entirely

different types of history series, using the compelling story or narrative as a template. (VanSledright, 1996, p.3)

These books have a definite advantage over textbooks, according to VanSledright, because the authors focus not on word counts, but on engaging the reader to the point where they will want to learn more about the topic. At this point, they may turn to a textbook, but only if they are already interested in the subject. Fortunately, this practice is continuing and more and more people are writing these historical-fiction novels in an attempt to invite readers to get a different and more exciting look at history than what they are used to. This, more than many other techniques, will help students learn to read historically because they will read a history book that is *not* boring, and if all goes according to plan, they will *want* to research the topic further on their own instead of being forced to research it by their teacher.

On the same page of the trade book verses textbook argument is the fact that, if a history teacher does not shake things up and challenge the students, they will not be excited about learning. If something is familiar to them, there is no reason for them to study it and they will want to move on to the next topic. Historian Richard White writes:

Any good history begins in strangeness. The past should not be comfortable. The past should not be a familiar echo of the present, for if it is familiar why revisit it? The past should be so strange that you wonder how you and the people you know and love could come from such a time.

(Wineburg 11)

It is a teacher's job to make history exciting for the students, and this is done by giving them a different view on the subject and by almost making it uncomfortable for them;

because only then will they want to revisit it. This can be achieved through the use of trade books. Oftentimes the author portrays views that are not typically expressed in a normal history classroom, which gives the students a different outlook on the topic and often makes them excited and willing to learn more and study the subject in-depth on their own.

When reading a primary source or another type of document that is difficult to get through, it is important to go slowly with the students and to take the text in smaller portions. This idea was inspired by my interview with Mary Cardwell, and I believe it is extremely important when helping students learn how to read historically. One of the most dangerous things is for a student to feel overwhelmed while reading a document. This will turn them away from the subject faster than anything else. By helping them work through the first several primary sources, they will get a feel for the language used and the structure in which it is written. Eventually, the teacher can begin to wean them off of this dependence on explanations, but he/she must still encourage them to stop every once in a while to gather their thoughts and refresh themselves. Also, it is extremely important for the teacher to occasionally ask the class how they are doing and make sure that they are understanding the text, even after they are weaned off of the need for explanations. This just makes sure that the students are still doing alright and that they are fully ready to tackle the information on their own.

Along these same lines, it is important while the teacher is explaining the primary sources to make sure they address the issue of differing languages. There are several techniques that can be used to help these students learn how to read these historical documents. First, the teacher should simply ask them where the most confusion is found.

Assuming can be a very dangerous thing for a teacher to do. Oftentimes, students will understand things the teacher thinks they will need work on, but struggle on some of the more simple concepts. By addressing the exact spots that the students need help, the teacher will not waste valuable class time going over things that the students already have a firm grasp on.

Second, one way to help the students understand the language is to make a chart or a timeline that stretches from the era in question all the way to the present. On this chart there should be words that were used in the specific era, then they can move along that line through the years until they come to the modern day translation. This would help not only the average (or above average) students, but would be particularly helpful for the students that are struggling or that are more visual learners. By being able to physically see how the usage of the word has changed, they will be able to relate the two together easier than if they just heard a teacher tell them how it has changed over the years. This technique helps people with different types of intelligences (noted by Gardner), and can reach more students that typically would not do as well with typical bookwork in class. It would also be a quick guide when a student is reading and they get hung up on a particular sentence that is worded differently than they are used to. All they would need to do is look up from their reading to the wall with the chart, translate the words into something that would help them, and then continue with the text. This would help students to not become so frustrated with their readings and would give them an overall positive outlook toward reading historical documents.

The third way I would help students understand that difference in languages is simply through trial and error. Students learn more through mistakes than by a teacher

sitting in front of class and giving them the information. Even if a student is actively engaged in learning, they will remember the information a lot better if they get it wrong one or two times because they *find* the solutions and the patterns *themselves*, which puts it on a much more personal level. Through the process of trial and error, the students learn what works and what doesn't, but they also simultaneously go through the problem several times, which engrains it into their heads more and more. This theory may not be the most enjoyable for the students, but they will undoubtedly remember the information much better than if I simply stood in the front of the classroom and told them how to do everything exactly right.

The final way I would help my students understand the language used in the primary sources is through guided imagery. This term refers to the act of trying to envision oneself inside the shoes of another. By having the students try to place themselves in the situation after studying the language a little bit, they will hopefully be able to understand exactly where the speaker is coming from and why they say the things that they do. If I were to implement this last idea into my class to help teach the language of the primary source, I would probably have the students do a project where they write a journal or other work from the time period in question. They would be required to use the language of the time, and should refer to events, people, and ideals/biases that were common in those days. Not only will they get to learn the language through actually *using* it themselves, but they would also be able to learn important events and mindsets from that time period as well. Envisioning themselves as being in the same situation as the speaker allows them to not only become more excited about the reading, but they also will be able to understand the entire concept much easier as well.

It is also important when reading historical texts to remember to use multiple sources. Bruce VanSledright actually wrote several articles that focused on this topic. He really states the overall theme when he writes, “It is possible that learning history from multiple sources—where textbooks and a wide array of alternative history texts and other sources of information about the past are readily available—may actually enhance critical literacy and amplify historical understanding” (VanSledright, 1996, p. 12). Essentially what VanSledright is saying is that, while history textbooks can still be used in the classroom effectively, they should be used in correlation to other historical texts that may be more interesting for the students. If they are interested, they will want to learn more and become better educated on their own time, which is an admirable goal to reach for. Although this sounds like common sense, many teachers do not put this into practice. VanSledright wanted to check this theory, so he had several male and female students participate in a class lecture that involved both the textbook and other books for analysis purposes. Bruce Vansledright reported that, “With the exception of Saul, who said he did not much like reading in general, all of the students consistently reported that they enjoyed working with and reading from the alternative texts more so than from the large hardcover textbook” (VanSledright, 1994, pg 16). This approach will actively engage the students in history, and they may find one trade book or primary/secondary source in particular that they would like to research further. I would let them go with this idea entirely, and I may even offer some extra credit once he/she is finished with the project. Even though this approach is a little more time-consuming, the payoff is definitely worth all of the extra time and effort that is put in to making the project work. An interview with a teacher actually shows first-hand how this method works and that it

can really be used quite well in a classroom setting. The teacher quotes a student when she says:

“Well, I read in this book and it said this, then I read in this book and it said that, and then I read in this here book and it said the opposite.” I [the teacher] said, “Yes, well why do you think that is?” We talk about the author’s point of view and that kind of thing. If you are only relying on one source and one person to give you the information, that’s trouble.

(VanSledright, 1997, pg 11)

It is clearly extremely important to get different views, and by using multiple sources (either primary, secondary, or trade books) a student can gather the information and make an informed decision on his/her own.

There are several strategies suggested by Jetton and Dole that I would definitely put into regular practice with my students once I become a high school history teacher. These strategies would work well for history in particular because of the way they deal with language, reading, and mindsets of the original authors. The first one I would use would be a QTA or “Question the Author” (Jetton and Dole 143). This is extremely important when reading a primary source because there is almost *always* some sort of bias that is included in the work, whether it is intentional or not. By helping the students understand how to question the author and determine if his/her knowledge is factual or not, they can decide for themselves what bias they want to believe and why they feel it is the better choice out of the given options.

The second method I would use is a DRTA or “Directed Reading and Thinking Activity”. This method is used when the teacher wants the students to make a prediction

about what they think is going to happen. Obviously, this can be a little more difficult with history because we already know how the event ended, but it would be a good tool to ask the students how the ending might have been different if the circumstances were different (for instance, what would have happened in the Revolutionary War if George Washington was killed as he crossed the Delaware River?). It just gives the students another angle to look at a situation from, and allows them to think on a higher level than they usually do.

One extremely important method I would use is a KWL or “Know, Want to Know, Learned” (Jetton and Dole 31-32). This would help me as the teacher a lot because I would know what I should spend more time on in order to help the students, as well as the portions that I maybe won’t need to hit as hard. This practice also gives the students a chance to organize their thoughts and figure out what they already know, as well as what intrigues them. Obviously, I would have to change some of my lesson plans in order to accommodate the things that the students want to know, but if I sporadically teach them the things that they are interested in, they will be more eager to pay attention to the class as a whole as opposed to listening to the history of an event that they could not care less about.

The fourth strategy I would use is called a “Think Aloud” (Jetton and Dole 168). This strategy requires that the students either come together as a whole class or in smaller groups and simply talk about what they read. Sometimes, when a student is talking about something to other students or teaching them something that they figured out, they will oftentimes learn even more about the subject than they realized. This is a great thing when students can begin to teach themselves, because it shows that they are able to use

their minds on a higher level than many others. Although it is a very good strategy, it is extremely important that the teacher make sure they are talking about the text and *not* about interesting things going on in the students' lives. It would be very easy for a student to get off-task in a discussion like this, so the teacher must be constantly moving around the room instigating conversation and proposing ideas that will make the students think.

It is also important for people reading historical texts to be constantly annotating the text. This means that the reader is interacting with the text by writing in the margins or around the words themselves. Especially when a student is reading a particularly difficult primary source with a confusing language, they should be taught that they can and should write in the margins so they can look back on their notes quickly to find the information they need, as well as a brief summary of the paragraph that corresponds to the writing. This technique makes it significantly easier for a student to quickly remember what the text was about and where they should go if they need a specific quote or some information.

Although this technique does not involve the students doing too much on their own, I as the teacher would try to make as many of my lesson plans as possible into multimodal projects or lectures. Pictures or sounds always help the words come to life, and it helps the students that are typically not as good at reading or writing to understand the basic concepts more and more.

While using strategies is extremely important for a teacher, I think that it is even more important for the teacher to set goals not only for his/herself, but for the students as well. For instance, when I become a teacher, I already have four goals that I want to

accomplish. The first is that I want the students to be able to make connections between what is happening in the time period that the specific primary source was written both in that location as well as other places around the world. It is important for students to know what events were spurred by another event and why it came about as it did. The second goal I have for my future students is that they will be able to not only identify the meanings of different words used in a specific time period, but that they will also be able to *use* those words appropriately in a sentence should it be required of them. The project where they write a journal from a specific time period would help accomplish this goal. The third goal I have for my students is for them to be able to quickly identify notable characters in history. My history teacher in high school was somewhat lacking, and so this is especially difficult for me, and I do not want my students to go through the same hardships that I have to face now that I am a history major. If somebody asks them why Desmond Tutu is important, they should not only be able to tell them the answer, but they should also be able to give background information not only on him, but the entire setting as a whole. The final goal I have for my students, and arguable the most important, is that they will go from *having* to learn history to *wanting* to learn history. If I can accomplish this, then my purpose as a teacher has been fulfilled. I want my students to be excited about learning, and to continue this excitement well after graduation and into their declining years. History is startlingly fascinating, and if I can show my students just how thrilling it can be, I can retire a happy and content man.

History is extremely captivating, but it is imperative that students learn not only what is specific to reading historically, but also *how* to find those specifics and implement them at the proper time. By noting different interviews with people closely

associated with history, as well as techniques that are applicable to reading history effectively and taking these into account when I become a high school history teacher, I can hopefully change the lives of my students and give them a new zeal for history that they never thought was possible. This is my goal, and with work and dedication, it can be achieved.

Works Cited

Jetton, Tamara L., and Janice A. Dole, eds. Adolescent Literacy Research and Practice.

Minneapolis: Guilford Publications, Incorporated, 2004.

VanSledright, Bruce, and Christine Kelly. "Reading American History." June 1996.

University of Maryland at College Park. Oct. 2008

<http://eric.ed.gov:80/ericdocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/14/be/98.pdf>.

VanSledright, Bruce. "Concept and Strategic Knowledge Development in Historical

Study." Nov. 1997. University of Maryland at College Park. Oct. 2008

<http://eric.ed.gov:80/ericdocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/17/9f/69.pdf>.

Wineburg, Sam. Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of

Teaching the Past. New York: Temple University Press, 2001.