

Teaching for Historical Literacy

When teachers mesh content-rich curriculum with good literacy practices, history lessons become meaningful.

Anne Goudvis and Stephanie Harvey

At the very moment when calls for a rigorous, content-rich curriculum reverberate from coast to coast in the United States, many elementary schools have put history and social studies on the back burner. Increasingly, these disciplines are being squeezed into an ever smaller corner of the school day or, astonishingly, abandoned altogether. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has morphed into MCLB—Much Curriculum Left Behind—as schools narrow their curriculums in the face of high-stakes tests in math and reading (Berliner, 2009). But in a democracy, history and social studies shouldn't be optional.

The problem is not just that we're cutting back on teaching history and social studies in elementary schools; it's also how we "cover" what we do teach. The curriculum has become a mile wide and an inch deep. Students too often experience social studies as a passive slog through the textbook. When these tomes become the default curriculum, students get what Diane Ravitch (2010) calls "boring, abbreviated pap in the history textbook that reduces stirring events, colorful personalities and riveting controversies to . . . a few

leaden paragraphs" (p. 237). Instead, students should be reading a wide range of historical sources; they should be grappling with and constructing ideas for themselves.

We stand with the history enthusiasts and teachers who refuse to narrow the curriculum. How will U.S. students ever participate fully and thoughtfully in the democratic process if they have little time to learn about how that process has worked in the past? To build knowledge and understanding—to become literate in history—students need to read and learn about the stories, mysteries, questions, controversies, issues, discoveries, and drama that are the real substance of history.

Reading and Thinking About History

Teaching content literacy enables teachers to design a curriculum that students can sink their teeth into. This approach teaches students to use reading and thinking strategies as tools to acquire knowledge in history, science, and other subject areas. As P. David Pearson and colleagues (Pearson, Moje, & Greenleaf, 2010) assert,



Learning is a consequence of thinking. . . . Far from thinking coming after knowledge, knowledge comes on the coattails of thinking. . . . Knowledge does not just sit there; it functions richly in people's lives so they can understand and deal with the world. (p. 8)

For many of us for whom history was merely memorizing facts and dates, knowledge *did* just sit there, remaining in place long enough for Friday's quiz but disappearing in time for weekend shenanigans. But when educators teach for historical literacy, they merge foundational literacy practices with engaging resources in a content-rich curriculum—and students draw on thinking strategies as they read (see fig. 1, p. 54). Reading and thinking about many historical sources help build skills connected to the common core state standards for

Without systematic attention to reading and writing in subjects like science and history, students will leave schools with an impoverished sense of what it means to use the tools of literacy for learning or even to reason within various disciplines. (p. 460)

It's important to teach students the difference between information and knowledge. For information to become knowledge, students need to think about it. It may not seem like rocket science to say that students need to think about what they're learning, but rote memorization has too frequently been part of conventional history instruction. Memorizing facts and birth-death dates without learning about the time period, the people themselves, and the challenges they faced dumbs down history. It limits young people's understanding of their role as citizens in a democratic society. As David Perkins (1992) notes,

reading informational text, such as citing text evidence to support important ideas, arriving at an understanding of a text by asking and answering questions about it, and evaluating the information and arguments in texts.

As consultants, we have worked in classrooms to integrate reading and thinking strategies with history and social studies instruction. Here we highlight one experience.

Historical Literacy at Work in the Classroom

In Matthew Reif's 5th grade classroom in Prince George's County, Maryland, student work covers the classroom walls and cascades out into the hallway. Some students talk quietly together in groups; others read independently at their desks or sprawled on the floor. One of the coauthors of this article, Anne, recently had the good fortune to work with Matthew to infuse reading and thinking strategies into the history

curriculum (Goudvis & Buhrow, 2011).

On a typical day in Matthew's class, everyone is reading, viewing, and thinking about the current history topic—in this case, westward expansion in the United States. To carve out room for history in a crowded day, Matthew has combined the time allocated for social studies and literacy. The classroom is awash with non-fiction articles, historical fiction picture books, maps, diaries, trade books, letters, photographs, and artifacts. Matthew, Anne, and the students have gathered these multiple-genre sources from libraries and websites. They have heeded Allington and Johnston's (2002) findings that classrooms linked to high achievement use a variety of materials and resources, not one basal reader or textbook. There's not a worksheet or end-of-chapter question in sight as the kids read, write, draw, view, question, debate, discuss, and investigate.

Teachers can't just implore students to ask thoughtful questions or draw reasonable inferences; we have to show them how.

But teachers can't just implore students to ask thoughtful questions or draw reasonable inferences; we have to show them how. Matthew and Anne model for students how to merge thinking with new information by annotating their thoughts in the margins or on sticky notes. They peel back the layers of their own thinking—demonstrating how a person reasons through a text to summarize what's

important or to keep a lingering question in mind. As students use their growing repertoire of strategies in their own reading, there is plenty of time to talk about their new learning in pairs or small groups. The whole class gathers to engage in wide-ranging, and sometimes heated, discussions.

Four Generative Practices

In our work helping teachers revamp social studies instruction, we emphasize four practices that foster deep reading and learning about history. Each focuses on comprehension strategies as tools for learning. These practices can be adapted to use with many different topics and texts.

1. Interact with multiple texts to build knowledge.

Building students' knowledge store is essential if they are to deepen their understanding of ideas surrounding

FIGURE 1. Using Thinking Strategies to Learn About History

Comprehension/thinking strategy	Students use this strategy in history when they . . .
Monitor understanding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn new information by annotating texts and leaving tracks that show their thinking.
Activate background knowledge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connect the new to the known; use background knowledge to inform reading.
Ask questions.	<p>Ask and answer questions to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquire information. • Research and investigate. • Interpret and analyze information and ideas. • Explore essential questions.
Draw inferences and conclusions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infer ideas, themes, and issues on the basis of text evidence. • Analyze and interpret different perspectives and points of view.
Determine importance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sort and sift important information from interesting but unimportant details. • Evaluate the information and ideas in a text to determine what's important to remember.
Summarize and synthesize.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze, compare, and contrast information across different sources to build content knowledge and understanding.

topics like the westward expansion. To do this, Matthew Reif's students did some serious reading. They made that reading "thinking intensive" (Harvard College Library, 2007), merging their background knowledge with new information, jotting down questions, and annotating reactions.

Matthew's students couldn't wait to get their hands on stories of children traveling west on a wagon train or American Indian children living on the plains. Comments like "I don't believe this!" or "That's outrageous!" echoed around the room as they read about the experiences of defiant outlaws and courageous lawmen like Bass Reeves, who risked his life to provide law and order in his small corner of the West. Students devoured articles and historical fiction picture books about the intrepid Chinese workers who helped build the transcontinental railroad and the diaries of pioneers who survived a raging blizzard in the Rockies.

Students chose topics that interested them and formed small groups with others who wanted to read about and research that topic. These groups summarized and shared their new learning on a mind map (Buzan, 1993). Working on topics they chose enabled students to investigate questions that piqued their interest from the start. One group researched the dangers and obstacles pioneers encountered on their journeys; another read about the Trail of Tears. Students who read about building the transcontinental railroad investigated the question, How did the railroads change the Wild West? Each student had a different take on the question, so their dialogue encompassed a variety of perspectives. For instance, Nicholas wrote,

I infer that it wasn't fair for the Indians because the Americans built the railroad on the Indians' land. There was a treaty with the Indians saying this is your land and we won't bother you, but they took back that treaty. I feel grief for the Indians.

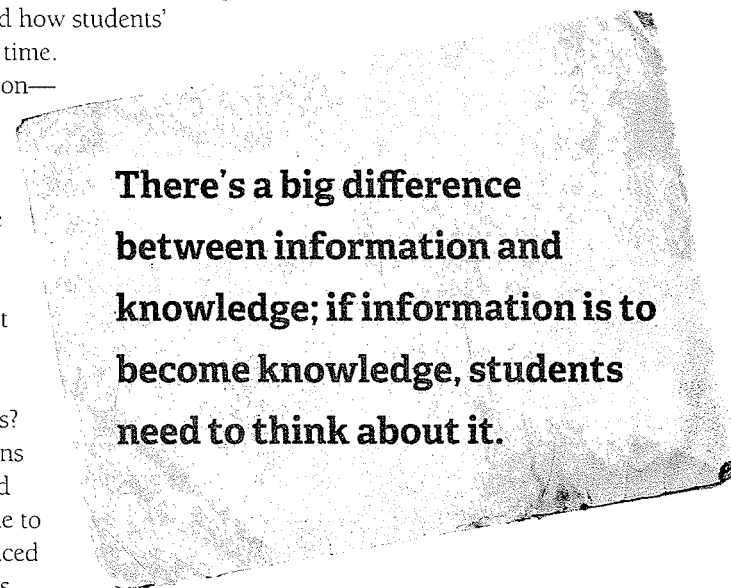
2. Ask questions for different purposes. Historical thinking, for elementary students, begins with authentic questions. As students interacted with high-interest personal narratives, articles, visual representations, and other sources, both primary and secondary, many questions emerged. Matthew listed students' questions on a continually updated chart, which provided a window into their background knowledge and thinking. As students gained more information from their reading, he added answers to the chart and noticed how students' thinking changed over time.

One student's question—
The American Indians were here first, so whose land was it?—sparked more questions about the concept of land, such as, Did the government buy the land from the American Indians? What about the treaties? Some essential questions Anne and Matthew had identified ahead of time to guide instruction surfaced in our class discussions, such as, Why did people pull up stakes and settle the West? How did "Manifest Destiny" drive exploration and settlement? Throughout the study, we addressed these broader questions, exploring the notion of westward expansion from many different perspectives. We made sure to include people, events, and points of view that are often glossed over or left out of textbooks.

The students were bursting with queries after they read letters written in 1848 by Tabitha Brown, a 66-year-old woman who ventured west because she didn't want to be left behind. Tabitha traveled on a wagon train to Oregon with her grown children and 77-year-old brother-in-law, Captain John. Her letters provide a remarkable account of the journey, especially her nights alone

in the wilderness and her experience losing her wagon and all her belongings in a rushing river. Matthew organized students' questions into a chart showing how different kinds of questions inform historical understanding (see fig. 2, p. 56). This graphic aid broadened students' question-asking repertoires and raised their awareness of the purposes of different kinds of questions.

As a follow-up, Matthew and Anne highlighted the differences between primary and secondary sources by



comparing Tabitha's actual letters with a 1954 *Reader's Digest* article about her (Wolfe, 1954). One child astutely pointed out that someone probably used Tabitha's letters to write the magazine article. The kids began to grasp the idea that we learn history from the actual accounts, journals, and letters of real people.

3. Evaluate authors' purposes and perspectives.

Early in the unit, we noticed that students were taking information at face value. Part of the difficulty they had distinguishing between more and less reliable sources of information lay in their limited background knowledge. As their knowledge increased, students

used the information they acquired to evaluate sources by asking a series of questions that we taught them: Who wrote this source? Why? What is the author's perspective or point of view—and possible biases? How does the author spin the ideas and information?

For example, students examined the late-19th-century poster shown on page 57, bringing in their prior knowledge about California, the settling of the West, and the growth of the railroads. As they reasoned through the information on the poster together, they

drew inferences about who created it and why:

GREGORY: What does it mean by "Millions of Immigrants"? There weren't millions of immigrants, were there? Maybe it means that there was enough land for millions.

ALICIA: It says "government lands untaken." They wanted people to know there was no one there so they could come live on the land.

JENNY: It says there are no blizzards, but what about earthquakes? I know there are earthquakes in California.

NAYELI: I think it's a false advertisement because the government's exaggerating about all the good things.

ALLAN: I was thinking that the government had nothing to do with it. Maybe somebody owned this land and wanted to sell it.

NICHOLAS: The railroad company needed people to ride on it and make money. Maybe this was from the railroads.

Students concluded that the half-truths and hype on the poster pegged it as an advertisement trying to persuade immigrants to move to California.

FIGURE 2. How Students' Questions Inform Their Historical Thinking

Question Type	Examples from Matthew Reif's Class	How Such Questions Inform Historical Understanding
Information-seeking questions	Did Tabitha meet American Indians on her journey west? What happened when she encountered American Indians?	Fill in gaps in our information. Clarify information. Address misconceptions.
Explanation-seeking questions (Why? How?)	Why would someone this old go west? How did she and her family survive these hardships?	Use information to focus on big ideas and issues. Address lingering questions and essential questions.
Questions of empathy	I can't imagine losing all my belongings in a river. How did they find food and shelter after that? How did they keep going?	Build awareness of other perspectives and viewpoints. Encourage interest and engagement.
Questions that encourage imaginative thinking and supposition	How might things have turned out differently if. . . ? What if Tabitha hadn't followed the "guide" who promised them a shortcut?	Encourage interpretation and thinking outside the box.
Questions that prompt historical investigation or challenge information	Her story was so amazing that I wondered whether she was telling the truth. How could we find out whether this really happened? What other sources would give us more information?	Analyze and interpret sources citing evidence. Evaluate conclusions on the basis of text evidence. Synthesize information and corroborate evidence across sources.

Source: Adapted from a chart that originally appeared in the chapter "History Lessons" by Anne Goudvis and Brad Buhrow in *Comprehension Going Forward*, edited by H. Daniels, 2011, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Copyright © 2011 by Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH. Adapted with permission.

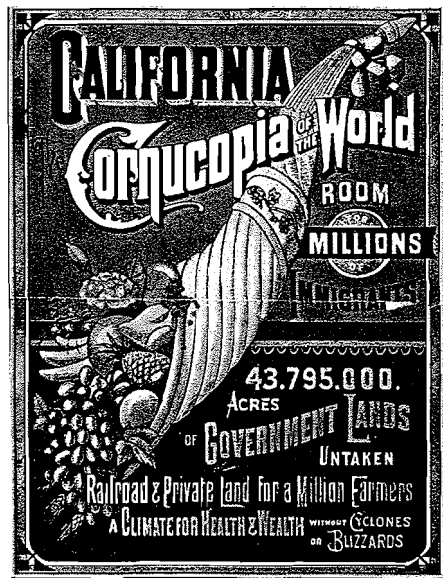
Students did further research and discovered that the poster was most likely propaganda from a land company. Having the tools to question and interpret texts encouraged students to take a more skeptical stance with all sources they encountered.

4. Use picture books to infer important ideas.

Historical fiction picture books immerse students in the stories of the past. Students can break out of their immediate frame of reference and gain a more complete understanding of what life was like. Well-written historical fiction picture books are complex, carefully crafted texts with vivid language and striking illustrations. Because these books are short, students can read a lot of them and engage in critical thinking about different points of view—understanding the journey west, for example, from the perspective of pioneers, American Indians, or traders.

Matthew's students worked in small groups to read *Sitting Bull Remembers* by Ann Turner, immersing themselves in Sitting Bull's recollections of his long life. Students made connections to information from a previously read picture book about Sitting Bull's childhood, *A Boy Called Slow* by Joseph Bruchac. The kids discussed nonfiction accounts of the American Indian victory at Little Bighorn, Sitting Bull's valiant efforts to keep his people free, and his final years on a reservation.

This moving story prompted students to synthesize and reflect on what they had learned about Sitting Bull and the Sioux. As they engaged in discussions about themes like courage, perseverance, injustice, and conflict, they pieced together a real-life puzzle with implications for the history and life of a people. These various perspectives enriched their



understanding far beyond what it would have been had they read one account.

Students Think for Themselves

Reading shapes and changes thinking. In teaching history, we take Eleanor Roosevelt's words as our mantra:

Every effort must be made in childhood to teach the young to use their own minds. For one thing is sure, if they don't make up their own minds, someone will do it for them. (quoted in Beane, 2005, p. 75)

We believe that the reason Matthew's students brought so much enthusiasm and energy to this unit is that they came

Books for Teaching for Historical Literacy in Elementary School

- A Boy Called Slow: The True Story of Sitting Bull* by Joseph Bruchac. (1994). New York: Philomel.
- Children of the Wild West* by Russell Freedman. (1983). New York: Clarion.
- Bad News for Outlaws: The Remarkable Life of Bass Reeves, Deputy U.S. Marshall* by Vaunda Nelson. (2009). Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books.
- Sitting Bull Remembers* by Ann Turner. (2007). New York: HarperCollins.
- Coolies* by Yin. (2001). New York: Philomel.

to understand the power and potential of their own reading and thinking. They learned that there are many compelling ways to understand people who lived far away and long ago.

But it wasn't just about the past. Students linked the past to the present by learning to think for themselves and connect history to their own lives. What better way to prepare them to be engaged, thoughtful citizens? ■

References

- Allington, R. L., & Johnston, P. (2002). *Reading to learn: Lessons from exemplary fourth grade classrooms*. New York: Guilford.
- Beane, J. A. (2005). *A reason to teach: Creating classrooms of dignity and hope*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Berliner, D. (2009). Much curriculum left behind: A U.S. calamity in the making. *The Educational Forum*, 73(4), 284–296.
- Buzan, T. (1993). *The mind map*. New York: Penguin.
- Goudvis, A., & Buhrow, B. (2011). History lessons. In H. Daniels (Ed.), *Comprehension going forward* (pp. 128–149). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Harvard College Library. (2007). *Interrogating texts: Six reading habits to develop in your first year at Harvard*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University. Retrieved from <http://guides.hcl.harvard.edu/sixreadinghabits>
- Pearson, P. D., Moje, E., & Greenleaf, C. (2010, April 23). Literacy and science: Each in the service of the other. *Science*, 328, 459–463.
- Perkins, D. (1992). *Smart schools: Better thinking and learning for every child*. New York: Free Press.
- Raviuch, D. (2010). *The death and life of the great American school system*. New York: Basic Books.
- Wolfe, L. (1954, August). The independence of Tabitha Brown. *Reader's Digest*, 73–78.
- Anne Goudvis** (annegoudvis@gmail.com) and **Stephanie Harvey** (contact@stephanieharvey.com) are literacy consultants and authors. Their most recent resource is *The Comprehension Toolkit* series (Heinemann, 2007).