Teaching students to think critically using multiple texts in history

To foster critical thinking, middle school and high school teachers should use multiple texts rather than rely solely on a single textbook. Here are some suggestions for teachers to consider.

Why is critical thinking important to foster? One only has to hear and read the confusing array of messages we get in the media every day to realize that people need to evaluate those messages—to consider their source, their context, and their agreement or disagreement with one another—in order to know what to think and how to act on them. That evaluative stance is at the heart of critical thinking. The lack of critical thinking can lead to bad personal choices. Critical thinking, however, is vital not only to our personal well-being but also to the health of nations. Citizens, for instance, need to make informed, critical decisions when they go to the polls. Critical thinking is a foundation upon which democracies are built. And it is something that needs to be taught.

This article focuses on students’ reading of multiple texts in history classes, but the argument could be made that similar uses of multiple texts in a variety of classes would be effective in helping students to think critically. In addition, some of the recommendations for use in history classes are pertinent to other classes as well. I chose the discipline of history to use an example because the textbooks students typically read in middle and high school history and social science classes are easy to identify as being inadequate to foster critical thinking. Perhaps more than other texts, history texts’ traditionally narrative style obscures the work of the author and other historians in constructing historical knowledge. Students do not see the nature of evidence gathering and interpretation in history and the discursive
nature of history texts; thus, they tend to view history texts as "objective truth" that they do not question or otherwise think about critically.

The issue of multiple text use is important for reading professionals at the middle and secondary school level because "reading to learn" disciplinary information is a focus that they are asked to address. Students need to develop strategies for reading multiple texts that seem to be different from those used to read single textbooks, especially when the purpose for reading is to think critically. Reading professionals can help students develop these strategies.

The discrepancy between traditional history learning and thinking like a historian

Traditionally, high school history teachers have felt successful teaching history as a story. Typically, teachers use a single textbook, follow its sequence, and embellish it through skillful storytelling. Students become engaged in the narrative and learn about the story of history because of that engagement. Sometimes teachers require their students to write a paper on a particular time period or event in history, which causes students to learn about that topic in more depth than they could if they merely read the textbook. The main emphasis in the class, however, is on beginning with one era and moving students through subsequent time periods in order. This type of coverage appears to be based on the reasonable belief that one cannot fully understand a later time period unless one has learned about a previous one, although there is little research supporting that contention.

Critical thinking is also typically emphasized. History teachers ask questions of students that cause them to think about causes and effects, for example. Students are asked to demonstrate their critical thinking through writing and in discussion. In the three history classes my colleagues and I have observed, this pattern has been the norm. These classes were taught by excellent teachers who had gained reputations with students and faculty members for capturing students' attention and maintaining standards of excellence. Other researchers in history classes taught by excellent teachers have reported similar observations (Sturtevant, 1996). I believe, however, that typical instruction is inadequate in its approach to critical thinking, on the basis of my experience with college-level history classes.

History that is taught at the college level can be very different. At the University of Georgia, for example, students in beginning-level required history courses are asked to read multiple texts. In addition to the textbook, they are typically required to read several novels, original source documents, and essays, including the writings of authors who were alive during the time period being studied. For example, when I participated in helping students in an early U.S. history class, students were asked to read the writings of authors such as Captain John Smith, Mary Rollingsworth, and Benjamin Franklin. They were to relate these texts to the issues being read about in the history textbook.

For instance, students were asked to explain how Benjamin Franklin exemplified the principles of the Enlightenment based upon their knowledge of the Enlightenment from textbook and lectures and from what Franklin himself said about his beliefs. At another point, students read two opposing views of the same event, then were asked to reconcile the two views with the textbook version of the event. Students demonstrated their ability to analyze these multiple texts through essay questions on tests. Students in other history classes have reported to me that their professors require them to engage in numerous other activities as well, such as interviewing someone who has participated in a major historical event or interpreting history from a feminist or grassroots perspective.

The difference between students' high school history classes and their college courses is a source of immense stress and confusion to many. For example, in the history class in which I participated, approximately 40% of the students received grades lower than C, whereas less than 10% of the students received A's or B's. Students attending my seminar for help in how to deal with the various requirements in the class typically did not understand how they should be thinking about the multiple texts, even though the professor had told them what he expected. They believed they needed to learn important dates, events, and names of people (which was true), but they did not consider that they would have to think about these "facts" in any critical way.

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Their strategies for taking notes exemplified this observation. I observed nearly the entire class of students dutifully writing down information about events that were mentioned in lectures. But when the professor proceeded to explore interpretations of history (“Now, what do all of these events mean?”), students typically put down their pens. They did not appear to understand that the analysis of history is what historians value.

Why are the college history classes I observed organized in such a confusing way? When asked, the professors who teach them, who are practicing historians themselves, explain that their purpose in requiring multiple readings and in requiring students to participate in other activities is to get students to engage in the type of thinking required of historians. In other words, these historians are asking students to join the discourse community in history. Joining that community means understanding that history is not a story, but any number of stories, depending upon which sources are used by historians to reconstruct what took place during a previous era. The story that is told in history textbooks is not an exact retelling of what really happened, but is influenced by any number of factors, such as the political affiliation of the historian, the political and social climate of the time period in which the history was written, and the sources the historian used.

The simple fact that history textbooks are often revised to represent different viewpoints shows that these textbooks do not contain immutable information, they argue. For example, during the last decade, U.S. history textbooks have been revamped and now include accounts from the viewpoints of previously ignored cultural groups such as Native Americans and African Americans. History textbooks represent interpretations of history, not what “really” happened. The view that what is found in history textbooks is actually a construction of the author represents a constructivist viewpoint.

This view is also part of what is learned as one develops disciplinary knowledge (Hynd & Stahl, 1998) or what Alexander (1998) refers to as domain knowledge. Disciplinary knowledge is knowledge about the way information in a discipline gets constructed, and it includes an understanding of (a) how knowledge is created (e.g., through experimentation in science or through evidence gathering such as conducting interviews and reading original source documents in history); (b) how knowledge is shared (e.g., through journal articles, books, lectures); and (c) how knowledge gets accepted by academic and other communities as being important, useful, and “factual” (through publication in prestigious journals, corroboration by other academicians and scientists, or demonstrated usefulness to society).

When students understand how knowledge is created in a discipline, they are in much better positions to view that knowledge as partial and relational. That is, they understand that knowledge is always being constructed and reconstructed and that the “truth” known by a discipline is a result of social influences that reflect balances of power. For example, people used to believe that the earth was the center of the universe. Galileo, and later Newton, discovered a new truth—that the earth revolved around the sun. The scientific community did not immediately accept Galileo’s discovery, however, and he was persecuted for his contention. What was “truth” in Galileo’s time was maintained by the powerful. Practicing scientists and social scientists understand the relations between knowledge construction and social convention. They have a great deal of disciplinary knowledge, whereas students typically do not. Partially because of this disciplinary knowledge, historians understand the information they read on a more mature level and can engage in critical thinking.

Wineburg (1991a, 1991b) studied how expert historians read multiple documents about a historical event with which they were unfamiliar, and compared these historians’ comments (made as they read) about the texts with those of high school students who were familiar with the historical event. He found that the historians read the texts much differently than did the high school students. First, they engaged in sourcing; that is, they focused on the credentials of the author of the text and took into account the source of the writing (e.g., whether it was in a textbook or in an editorial in a magazine or newspaper). Second, they engaged in contextualization; they thought about the time period in which the particular writing took place and tried to imagine the social, cultural, and political climate that may have influenced the author’s writing. Finally, they engaged in corrobor-
tion; that is, as they read each text, they compared and contrasted the viewpoint in that text with that encountered in the other texts they had read, both in the study and on their own.

Wineburg concluded that the historians were interpreting the texts as arguments, or as ways for historians to present their perspectives, rather than as a collection of facts to be learned. The high school students, on the other hand, engaged in only a few instances of sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration. For the most part, they appeared to be reading the texts in order to learn the facts. Studies of high school students' reading of multiple documents about the Gulf of Tonkin incident in the Vietnam War (Stahl, Hynd, Britton, McNish, & Bosquet, 1996) found essentially the same thing. Although some students engaged in the activities noticed in historians, they mainly appeared to be reading the texts in order to find out what happened, learning the information that was in common across the texts and ignoring contradictory information.

It seems reasonable that students would benefit from knowing what historians do and engaging in that same type of thinking. Yet, learning to “think like a historian” is not typically the goal in middle and high school history classes. The purpose for this article is not to argue that the type of teaching we observed in high school history classes is ineffective and should be supplanted. I do believe it is effective at teaching students a story of history. However, I would like readers to consider the difference between the activities engaged in by high school students, those required of college-level history students, and those engaged in by practicing historians, and to think of ways to better prepare students to understand how historians think, so that they can think critically about historical events. That is, I would like to see currently effective instruction aimed at teaching content knowledge not supplanted, but supplemented by instruction that teaches students disciplinary knowledge and critical thinking as well.

**The relation between thinking like a historian and critical thinking**

The sort of thinking described by Wineburg (1991a, 1991b), in which historians engage in sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration, is at the heart of thinking critically about what one encounters in everyday life. That is, students who learn to think of what they read (and hear and see) as acts of communication by an author, speaker, or actor who exists in a time frame, belongs to certain groups, has an agenda, and is operating in a system of power can evaluate the message rather than merely understand it at a perfunctory level. Those students will be more inclined to question what they read, notice discrepancies across different accounts, place issues in perspective, examine assumptions, and look for a certain amount of agreement across sources before they buy into an argument. And the more they understand how the information was created in the first place, the more likely they are to view it with a critical eye. Not only will this critical eye improve one's understanding of history, it should also improve one's understanding of the often conflicting and confusing array of messages one encounters as a citizen. Thinking critically about history is akin to thinking critically about the present. In fact, I would argue that a critical understanding of one's historical roots is, if not absolutely necessary, very desirable. How can teachers foster development of a critical eye? One way is by requiring students in high school to read multiple texts.

**The argument for multiple texts**

In my view, it is difficult, with a single textbook, to teach students what historians do or to think critically about history. This difficulty, in large part, is due to the traditional format of most history textbooks. While textbooks in other fields such as psychology often refer to the research efforts of psychologists and may even report conflicting findings, history textbooks rarely present such information. Rather, the tradition is to present the information as a story. Thus, the reader never sees the hidden activity of the historian in constructing the telling of the story.

When several texts are taken in concert, however, a teaching opportunity is present, especially when the texts contradict one another, present different information, or present the viewpoints of different groups of people. For example, my colleagues and I (Stahl, Hynd, Montgomery, &

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*Teaching students to think critically using multiple texts in history*
McClain, 1997) collected a group of three texts that represented a traditional, revisionist, and postrevisionist view of the discoveries of Christopher Columbus. The traditional text included in it the idea that Christopher Columbus's discoveries required great courage and brought the nations of the world closer together. The revisionist view presented the Native American perspective that Columbus was greedy and cruel, and that he denigrated the culture of a peace-loving and prosperous people, bringing disease and pestilence to an area that was not, to the people living there, "The New World." The postrevisionist view argued that Christopher Columbus was merely a product of his time and was neither more cruel nor more courageous than other explorers.

Indeed, this text said that other explorers would have "discovered" the "New World" even if Christopher Columbus had not, and the same subsequent events surely would have occurred.

These three texts present opportunities for history teachers to help students engage in sourcing (who wrote the texts, where did they appear), contextualization (in what time period were they written, what was the climate in which they were written), and corroboration (how do they compare and contrast). In helping students look at these elements they can make the argument that these texts represent the presentation of historical information as arguments rather than as "truth." Students can learn that history is interpreted differently by different groups at different time periods as a result of sociocultural and political conditions. Further, they can construct a deeper understanding of the life of Christopher Columbus by viewing him in these contrasting ways.

In another study of multiple texts my colleagues and I conducted, we presented texts on the Gulf of Tonkin incident, a precipitating event leading to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and, ultimately, to U.S. President Johnson's sending U.S. troops to Vietnam. The Gulf of Tonkin incident actually refers to two separate times that the U.S. surveillance ships in the Gulf of Tonkin believed they were being attacked by North Vietnamese vessels. Historians think, at this point in time, that the first incident really did happen, but that it was minor and dismissed by the president and his staff. They do not believe, however, based on the evidence, that the second attack actually took place. It was this second act that instigated a "limited retaliation" by President Johnson and led to the U.S. Congress passing the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which gave President Johnson the power to act in Vietnam without a declaration of war and the approval of Congress. There is still controversy about whether or not the President was acting in good faith when he asked for the resolution to be passed, and no one is completely sure of what happened during the two incidents.

We included more texts in this collection, ranging from a telegram sent by the Viet Cong to the President protesting U.S. involvement in activities in the Gulf of Tonkin prior to the incident; a historian's textbook-like account of the incident; an eyewitness account by James Stockdale, who was flying above the U.S. ships during the alleged second incident; an excerpt from Dean Rusk's autobiography that chronicles his and the president's actions in relation to the "attack"; the verbatim text of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution; excerpts from the Pentagon Papers (the official report of the military); and several essays published in newspapers at the time presenting opposing viewpoints. Each text was annotated, in that technical terms were explained and the author and source were described. This collection presented numerous opportunities for students to engage in thinking like a historian.

A number of educators have suggested that multiple texts such as these supplement a single classroom text (Perfetti, Britt, Rouet, & Mason, 1992; Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994; Wineburg, 1991a). Providing students with multiple perspectives on a particular event can help them construct richer and more detailed understandings of the event, thus enhancing content knowledge. The use of multiple texts encourages students to construct links across information presented in different texts, and this information and the links are remembered better because they are made by the students, not by the teacher or a textbook author (Spoehr & Spoehr, 1994). In addition, students who interpret multiple source documents are more likely to become engaged in the learning process. Students may have to make decisions about conflicting information, and these decisions enhance engagement. Finally, multiple sources give students the opportunity to practice historical analysis, much like a historian would. As noted,
historians regard texts as arguments rather than truth. Ideally, students who read multiple texts, especially those that offer conflicting interpretations, will begin to view history as a construction just as historians do.

**Studies of students reading multiple texts**

**Columbus texts.** We gave the three texts to ninth-grade advanced history students to read in varied order. We knew from prereading questionnaires that the students believed they already knew a great deal about Columbus, because they had learned about him since they were young. We asked students to describe Columbus before and after each reading, and we noted the changes in the negative or positive valence of these descriptions. We also asked students to answer a true/false test that presented common misconceptions about Columbus and looked for changes. From these and other measures, we found that students did change their views of Columbus on the basis of their readings, and the text that affected their view the most was the postrevisionist text, which they saw as the most unbiased account of Columbus's accomplishments. This study showed that students could see texts as arguments when they were obviously so, even without explicit instruction in “thinking like a historian.” Yet these texts were not like textbooks, but were taken from magazines. They may have been easier to identify as arguments because of that fact. Further, virtually all students reported, when asked, that they believed that history involved merely “learning what happened.” (For a more detailed explanation of the study, see Stahl et al., 1997.)

**Gulf of Tonkin texts.** What did we find when we had students read the larger collection of texts about the Gulf of Tonkin incident and Resolution? We presented the texts to 10th-grade advanced-placement students on a computer screen and asked students to be able to either (a) describe the Gulf of Tonkin incident and subsequent Resolution, or (b) argue a viewpoint about what happened and its significance. We allowed them to peruse the texts in whatever order they desired, to take notes, to specify the relation between topics after reading each text, and to write a postreading essay reflecting their assigned purpose for reading.

Students, by and large, showed little evidence that they were engaging in sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration. In addition, the notes they took show that most read the texts in the same way regardless of the purpose they were given, taking copious notes at first and taking fewer and fewer notes on reading subsequent texts. The consistency of the relation between topics did not become greater after reading the second text (we took this to mean that they did not develop richer understandings of the event). They seemed to spend most of their time learning about the event and looking for similarities across texts, but did not seem to focus on the differences. Further, they said that the textbook-like account of the incident was the most useful document. When they wrote essays, the students who were asked to describe the event generally described a version of it that represented the common ideas across the texts. Students who were asked to argue for a position did so without bringing much relevant textual information to bear as evidence for their position.

Thus, merely presenting the texts to students did little to encourage critical thinking about them (Stahl, Hynd, Britton, McNish, & Bosquet, 1996). That finding was not surprising given the fact that they had not been taught how to read history texts as historians would, but is a contrast from the results of the Columbus study. What was the difference? Although the two studies took place in different classrooms conducted by different teachers, students participated in history learning in much the same way across classes. The teachers taught history as a story, moved in chronological order from time period to time period, and emphasized the learning of what happened. They maintained friendly, but structured, environments for learning and were regarded as excellent teachers. One difference in the students was that those who studied the Gulf of Tonkin incident were a year older. Their more mature age should have been an advantage, so that they would be more likely to engage in critical thinking. This advantage was not realized.

The key differences in the Gulf of Tonkin study were that we used many more texts, and that students knew practically nothing about the Gulf of Tonkin before they began reading. My interpretation is that they were reading the texts for the pur-
pose of finding out about the incident, which left no time for thinking critically about it. In situations such as these, instructional support and more time may have helped the students view the texts more critically.

These two studies, in concert, tell us that students can engage in thinking similar to that of historians, but teachers cannot assume that they will be able to do so without instruction, especially if they have little background information about the topic they are studying or if the texts are complex as well as contradictory. We believed that students who read multiple texts would develop more elaborate understandings based upon each subsequent reading and that they would engage in historical analysis. Although some students evidenced those behaviors, most did not. In retrospect, however, the students in these studies were mirroring years of instruction during which history was presented as a collection of facts, as one clear story rather than many conflicting ones.

Perry (1970) argues that students begin college with a right-wrong, transmission orientation. They look for the “facts” and the right answers, and they believe that the ideas they learn are “reality.” As those ideas are challenged, they change their views of knowledge to being relativistic and believe that one idea is just as good as any other. As they mature, students start to develop a critical, constructive orientation, much like the one that practicing historians have adopted. That is, they believe that ideas can be evaluated as being more or less useful using some criteria. The progression in thinking is developmental.

The question is whether this development is age-bound or can be influenced by instruction. The level of one’s previous knowledge may be relevant to how much an individual can develop critical thinking in any given area, and strategy instruction may be dependent on this knowledge level as well. Alexander (1998) argues that strategy use interacts with knowledge and motivation in a developmental way, but that growth in one will influence growth in another. Booth (1994) says that the development of historical thinking is dependent on the student’s level of knowledge, ability to reason, level of interest, personal experiences, and verbal ability.

I argue that students do not have to be in college before they are ready to think critically about historical texts. Rather, we can teach students at an early age what it means to think like a historian. By providing students with a strategy for thinking about multiple, conflicting documents, and by helping students to understand the disciplinary knowledge of history as well as the content knowledge, teachers may help students read history as historians do. Booth (1994) documents the potential for middle and high school students to engage in historical thinking in his reports of history learning in Britain, where students were taught with source materials in an interactive and participatory way. Students who engage in such reading, I believe, are more likely to think critically not only about history, but about other conflicting messages as well.

Thinking like a historian also comes about from engaging in the construction of histories. Students can and should engage in the activities that historians engage in by writing history texts themselves. To do so, they would use multiple documents and interviews in order to interpret events and their significance. Although this article deals mainly with the reading of multiple texts, this reading could take place under a variety of conditions. One of the most ideal activities revolves around students’ actual participation in historical activity.

**Recommendations for using multiple texts in history**

Students need to be taught to think like historians. One thing we have learned from our research efforts is that students may not do so as a result of merely being presented with multiple texts representing differing viewpoints. This finding is especially true if students are not familiar with the topic. As mentioned earlier, research has suggested that some students persist in reading to get the facts that are common across multiple texts rather than in trying to understand why the interpretation of events is different. Therefore, my recommendation is to teach students what it means to read like historians. Reading teachers at the middle and high school level teach students strategies for reading multiple documents. In addition, they can help social science, history, and other discipline-based teachers to teach these strategies. This teaching can take multiple forms, but should include the following recommendations.
1. **Provide students with time to learn background knowledge.** Alexander and Judy (1990), in their literature review, conclude that there is a symbiosis between knowledge level and strategic thinking about that knowledge. That is, students who know something about a topic will be more able to engage in the kind of behaviors that will help them learn more; those strategic behaviors will result in knowing more about the topic. Therefore, I believe that, before teachers present students with multiple readings about a topic, students should learn some of the background necessary to help them interpret the multiple readings. That is, they should have an understanding of the known events and be aware that controversies exist.

2. **Discuss with students the methods that historians use and provide them with opportunities to engage in a historian's activities.** In addition to discussions with students about what historians do, teachers can ask that students engage in the activities of historians. For example, focusing on an event from the near past, students can search for magazine and newspaper articles about the event and interview people who experienced it. They can discuss the different viewpoints that they discovered, and write their own history of the event. Debriefing discussions can help students understand the complexities of interpretation that involve power relations, quality of evidence, traditional forms of writing, and so on. In this way, students will be gaining knowledge of the discipline as well as content knowledge.

3. **Teach students to use sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration when reading historical and other documents.** Because these three activities were most often the ones engaged in by historians (Wineburg, 1991a, 1991b), I believe that they should be the primary reading strategies taught to middle and high school students. Paying attention to the source, context, and corroboration elements in texts can help students evaluate the veracity of certain interpretations of events over others and become critical consumers of multiple perspectives in arenas other than historical ones.

4. **Students should be taught that texts are to be read critically.** Unless students understand the purpose for the presentation of multiple texts, they will have difficulty interpreting them. In our research, some students became angry because they could not understand the telegram written by the Viet Cong. If they had understood who the authors were (sourcing), the conditions under which the telegram was written (contextualization), and the authors' purpose for writing the telegram, they would have been much more capable of engaging in meaningful activity while reading. In other words, they would have known to interpret the text as a way for the author to make a point rather than reading it to get "the facts."

5. **Students should be taught how to write about history.** In the Gulf of Tonkin study, students had difficulty writing about the multiple documents. When asked to write opinion papers, most wrote generalizations without support that appeared unrelated to the texts they had read. When asked to write descriptive papers, most failed to represent the differing viewpoints presented in the multiple documents. Other researchers have found that students had similar difficulties. Greene (1994) suggests that topic knowledge, discourse knowledge, and disciplinary knowledge are all necessary for students to write like historians do. And, although teaching students to engage in reading like a historian might help them be better writers, I believe students will need to be taught to write as well. This instruction entails learning about the nature of facts, evidence, and interpretation and also about the ways they are used by historians to construct historical understanding. Students need to be brought into the discourse community by being taught how to write.

6. **Help students to consider how "thinking like a historian" will help them interpret other texts as well.** I believe that sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration are activities that will help students evaluate and interpret texts from other disciplines and in other venues as well. In the U.S., for example, we are bombarded with messages from the Internet, television, radio, and other media. These messages are complex and often contradictory. Students can use the same strategies to help them interpret those messages that they do for interpreting the messages in the history texts.

It will likely take a great deal of time and effort to move middle and high school students toward thinking in a constructivist manner about history. However, I believe the time and effort are worth it. Not only will students be better prepared to attend colleges and universities where the constructivist perspective is pervasive, but they will also learn a
way of thinking that should help them become more critical consumers of the often contradictory and confusing messages about vital national issues that appear in newspapers and magazines and on television. For these reasons, I urge teachers to use multiple texts and other activities designed to help students adopt constructivist notions of history.

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REFERENCES