Honoring Our People and Sharing Our Stories: A Look at the Past to Prepare for the Future

2019-2020
Required Readings and Reflections

2. *You Have to Know History to Actually Teach It* by David Cutler
3. *Thinking Like a Historian* by Sam Wineburg
5. *Hungry for History: Bringing Social Studies Back to Alabama* by Caroline Gibbons
Book Study and Reflection

Read the following passages in the book, Alabama: The Making of an American State by Edwin C. Bridges, paying close attention to the relationships between the residents of Alabama.

- pp 23-25, pp 32-38 stopping at “Settling the Mississippi Territory,”
- pp 57-60 stopping at “The Alabama Territory,”
- pp 76-82 stopping at “Two-Party Politics,”
- pp 93-99 stopping at “Alabama Mobilizes for War,”
- pp 112-124 stopping at “Rebuilding the Economy,”
- pp 140-146 stopping at “Cultural Variety,”
- pp.151-165 starting with “Protests, Populism, and Reaction” and stopping with “Innovation and Growth,” pp 205-222

Using the historical information that you have read, discuss the impact of how the people of Alabama have historically interacted and if the influences of those interactions are evident today in your school and in your community. Be sure to identify whether current relationships are determined by race, poverty, or both.

How will this knowledge influence your decisions as an educational leader?
'You Have to Know History to Actually Teach It'

DAVID CUTLER
JAN 10, 2014 | EDUCATION

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It’s tough for a historian to earn the adoration of both academia and popular culture, but Eric Foner has managed to do it. His books on American history are assigned reading at universities and colleges across the country. Reviewers have praised his work as “monumental in scope” and declared that it “approaches
brilliance.” He won a Pulitzer Prize for his 2011 book, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*—and appeared on *The Colbert Report* to discuss it. (In addition, I can’t overstate the lasting influence that Foner has had on my career as a high-school history teacher. I constantly refer to his growing body of work when teaching students not only original thinking, but also effective writing and analysis. I’ve also used his textbook to teach Advanced Placement United States History with terrific results.)

I recently spoke to Foner about the teachers who influenced him and how high-school history teachers can better prepare students for college.

You’ve spoken of how as a history student, many professors inspired you and your career, such as James Shenton and your dissertation adviser, the legendary Richard Hofstadter. What did you learn from them about what makes a great teacher?

I tell my students nowadays who are in graduate school and going on to become teachers—the number one thing is to have a real passion for your subject and to be able to convey that to your students. Obviously the content is important, but that’s not as unusual as being able to really convey why you think history is important. I think that’s what inspires students. Shenton was a great teacher, not really a very productive scholar in terms of writing, but a wonderful classroom teacher [who] inspired many, many students, myself among them.

Hofstadter was a little different. Hofstadter was not an inspiring classroom teacher. He was actually a very modest man. What I learned from Hofstadter was the craft of writing. He was a brilliant writer, he was a great critic, and he really taught the importance of taking language seriously, to think through the words you use, to rewrite. It's in the rewriting that the craft of writing really begins and the word choice, and the organization, and how to use quotations, and how to present evidence. The literary aspect of history is something that I really learned to value from Hofstadter.
Where should high-school teachers place more emphasis on the skills of history—the literary aspect of it, or the actual content?

I respect what high-school teachers do enormously. They have a much harder job than we do at the college level. I think both are important. I’m strongly in favor of students knowing the facts of history, not just memorizing or having it drilled into their heads. I’m certainly against this testing mania that’s going on now where you can judge whether someone really understands history by their performance on a multiple-choice test.

Knowledge of the events of history is important, obviously, but also I think what I see in college students, that seems to be lacking at least when they come into college, is writing experience. In other words, being able to write that little essay with an argument. I see that they think, "OK, there are the facts of history and that’s it—what more is there to be said?" But of course, the very selection of what is a fact, or what is important as a fact, is itself based on an interpretation. You can’t just separate fact and interpretation quite as simply as many people seem to think. I would love to see students get a little more experience in trying to write history, and trying to understand why historical interpretation changes over time.

Is an emphasis on rote memorization lessening student interest in history, and making the field seem less relevant to younger generations?

I think it probably is. There are many reasons for that. I think there’s a general tendency in education nowadays toward what you might call the pragmatic side of education, which is fine. The students need to have jobs eventually, no question about it. But education is not just a vocational enterprise—teaching people the skills that will enable them to get jobs—although that’s obviously part of it. [We]’re also teaching citizens. We try to teach people the skills that come along with studying history. The skills of evaluating evidence, of posing questions and answering them, of writing, of mobilizing information in order to make an argument. I think all of that is important in a democratic society if people are actually going to be active citizens. Teaching to the test does not really encourage emphasis on those aspects of the study of history.
How can high-school history teachers make the unfinished story of America a global conversation, not just a monologue with ourselves?

It’s hard enough to teach American history in a one-year course. To teach American history almost as an adjunct to world history is virtually impossible, I would have to say, in the time allotted. That does not mean the attempt shouldn't be made, but I think one doesn't want to swing all the way to the other extreme and say, "Oh well, the nation state doesn't matter anymore, it's obsolete, and therefore that shouldn't be a building block of historical study." The nation state is still here and will be for a good while, I think, despite the economic, cultural, intellectual globalization that has been going on. I guess I have a mixed reaction to that. On the one hand, yes, students need to have a broad-minded perspective and not a parochial or chauvinistic one. On the other hand, it’s easier to say “let’s globalize the study of history” than to do it.

What are your thoughts on any new approaches to heighten the interest of students at all levels, including high school?

There are different pedagogical approaches all over the place. There are many younger historians, much younger than I am, who are more familiar with using social media as part of history teaching—using all sorts of Internet and other resources in classrooms. I'm sure that can be very positive, although it might become distracting. My experience as a teacher and as a student long ago, is that there is no substitute for a good teacher. I don't care what bells and whistles that you're using, it's the teacher in the classroom. That's why I’m a little skeptical about MOOCs, online education. I'm old-fashioned enough to believe that the presence of a teacher is actually critical to learning.

I'm less interested in pedagogical approaches than the training of the teacher, the ability of the teacher, the knowledge of the teacher, and the teacher's ability to inspire students by conveying his or her own enthusiasm for the subject. That hasn't actually changed nearly as much as the technology of education has.
Do you have other specific advice for what teachers can do to more effectively instruct history students?

The first thing I would say is that we have to get away from the idea that any old person can teach history. A lot of the history teachers in this country are actually athletic coaches. I mention this in class, and students always say, "Oh yeah, Coach Smith, he taught my history course." Why? Well, Coach Smith is the football coach, and in the spring he's not doing much, and they say, "Well, put him in the history course, he can do that."

They wouldn't put him in a French course, or a physics course. The number-one thing is, you have to know history to actually teach it. That seems like an obvious point, but sometimes it's ignored in schools. Even more than that, I think it's important that people who are teaching history do have training in history. A lot of times people have education degrees, which have not actually provided them with a lot of training in the subject. They know a lot about methodology. [That’s] important, but as I say, the key thing is really to love the subject, to be able to convey that to your students, and if you can do that, I think you'll be a great teacher.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID CUTLER teaches history and journalism at Brimmer and May in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. He writes regularly about education at SpinEdu.

Twitter
“You Have to Know History to Actually Teach It”

Name: 

School/System: 

Phase Two Reflection

After reading the article, “You Have to Know History to Actually Teach It,” answer the following questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>According to Foner, what did he learn about those who taught him?</td>
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<td>What does Foner suggest are the most important skills that students lack when entering college?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are three issues that Foner sees as instructional challenges to history instruction?</td>
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Thinking Like a Historian
By Sam Wineburg

Historical Thinking: Memorizing Facts and Stuff?
When I recently asked Kevin, a sixteen-year-old high school junior, what he needed to do well in history class, he had little doubt: “A good memory.”

“Anything else?”

“Nope. Just memorize facts and stuff, know ‘em cold, and when you get the test, give it all back to the teacher.”

“What about thinking? Does that have anything to do with history?”

“Nope. It’s all pretty simple. Stuff happened a long time ago. People wrote it down. Others copied it and put it in a book. History!”

I’ve spent nearly 20 years studying how high school students learn history. Over the years I’ve met many Kevins, for whom the life has been sucked out of history, leaving only a grim list of names and dates. When confronted with the term “historical thinking,” many students scratch their heads in confusion, stumped by an alleged connection.

Historians as Detectives: Searching for Evidence Among Primary Sources

The funny thing is that when you ask historians what they do, a different picture emerges. They see themselves as detectives searching for evidence among primary sources to a mystery that can never be completely solved. Wouldn’t this image be more enticing to a bored high school student? It would, and that’s one reason why thinking like a historian deserves a place in the American classroom, the sooner the better.

To historians, history is an argument about what facts should or shouldn’t mean. Even when historians are able to piece together the basic story of what happened, they rarely agree about what an event means or what caused it. Historians argue about the past’s meaning and what it has to tell us in the present.

But, you may ask, if history has already happened, what’s there to argue about? Plenty. Was the American Revolution a fight against tyranny or an attempt by the well bred to maintain their social status? Was the Cold War really a conflict of democracy versus communism or a struggle between two superpowers for dominance?

Divergent opinions swirl around these questions and other matters of unsettled history – opinions that get students talking, and thinking, and learning. But while everyone is entitled to an opinion, not every opinion deserves to be believed. In history, a persuasive opinion is one backed up by evidence.

What is Historical Thinking?

It would be easy to conclude that historians simply know more about American history than high school students do. But this isn’t necessarily the case. Beyond highly specialized areas of concentrations, even doctoral level historians don’t possess factual knowledge about every topic. What historians do have is a “historical approach” to primary sources that is often taken for granted by those practiced in it. However, this approach unlocks a world closed to untutored readers.

For example, before approaching a document, historians come prepared with a list of questions—about author, context, time period—that form a mental framework for the details to follow. Most important of all, these questions transform the act of reading from passive reception to an engaged and passionate interrogation. If we want students to remember historical facts, this approach, not memorization, is the key.

“Thinking Like a Historian,” Sam Wineburg 1
Teaching Students to Think Historically

How can teachers help their students to begin thinking like historians? Teaching a way of thinking requires making thinking visible. We need to show students not only what historians think, but how they think, and then guide students as they learn to engage in this process.

Consider introducing students to several specific strategies for reading historical documents: sourcing, contextualizing, close reading, using background knowledge, reading the silences, and corroborating. Each strategy is defined below, followed by teaching ideas.

- **Sourcing**: Think about a document's author and its creation. Select a historical document, such as a diary entry, letter or memo, and provide students with copies. Model for students how to scan the document for its attribution, often at the end, as a first step instead of reading the text from beginning to end. Demonstrate how to begin questioning the source by posing questions to the class: Who created this document? When? For what purpose? How trustworthy might this source be? Why?

- **Contextualizing**: Situate the document and its events in time and place. Encourage students to brainstorm the document's historical context, piecing together major events, themes, and people that distinguish the era or period in which the document was created. List students' responses for the class to add to and refer to during close reading.

- **Close reading**: Carefully consider what the document says and the language used to say it. Teachers can model this strategy with a brief (90 seconds) “think-aloud” while reading the document to students. Try to verbalize every thought that comes to mind, no matter how trivial, as you try to make meaning of the document's account. For example, you may notice interesting words or phrases (“I've never heard that expression before”), consider contextual clues about time, place or people (“Hmm, that may be a reference to...”) or question facts, opinions and perspectives (“I wonder if that's what really happened?”).

- **Using Background Knowledge**: Use historical information and knowledge to read and understand the document. Encourage students to practice this strategy by pausing to ask as they read: What else do I know about this topic? What other knowledge do I possess that might apply?

- **Reading the Silences**: Identify what has been left out or is missing from the document by asking questions of its account. After reading the document, ask students to think about what they did not hear. Prompt class discussion with questions: What is the document's author not mentioning? Whose voices are we not hearing in a particular document or historical account? Which perspectives are missing?

- **Corroborating**: Ask questions about important details across multiple sources to determine points of agreement and disagreement. Ask students how they could proceed with this historical investigation: What questions arise, after careful reading and interpretation of the document? What other primary sources might corroborate or refute this interpretation? Have students discuss their responses in pairs and then share with the class.

You can also apply these strategies to reading textbooks. Textbooks offer an interpretation of history, but none gives us the final word. For example, textbook authors try to combine perspectives but they can never escape the fact that textbook is written by people living in a particular time and place. As such, textbooks record our contemporary (and unrecognized) assumptions, biases, and blind spots. One way to teach for historical thinking using a textbook is to have students compare its story of a historic event with evidence from primary sources. Another idea is to compare a current textbook's account of, say, the Spanish-American war with a textbook version written fifty or hundred years ago. Get students thinking with this question: “If history already happened, why does it keep changing?”

“Thinking Like a Historian,” Sam Wineburg
Any teacher’s goal (and his or her students’ goals) in reading and thinking like a historian should be to treat with skepticism any account that claims to present a full story of the past. Achieving this goal requires students to:

- Question the source
- Evaluate the evidence it offers for its assertions
- Read and consider the source more carefully than any historical account read before.

Why Teach Students to “Think Like Historians?”

Students need to be taught to “think like historians” not because they will become professional historians but precisely because most won’t. The goals of school history are not vocational but to prepare students to tolerate complexity, to adapt to new situations, and to resist the first answer that comes to mind.

When a video uploaded from a cell phone in Tehran can be transmitted to San Francisco in half a second, history reminds us to start with basic questions: Who sent it? Can it be trusted? What did the camera angle miss? There’s no shortage of forces telling students what to think. In this daily avalanche of information, students have never been in greater need of ways to make sense of it all.

Kevin’s right: Without thinking, history is meaningless. But when you add thinking, especially the specific skills of “thinking historically,” the past comes to life. In the end that is what reading, and thinking—and I would add, teaching—like a historian is all about.

Sam Wineburg, Stanford University, is the author of Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past, winner of the 2002 Frederick W. Ness Award for the “most important contribution to understanding the liberal arts” by the American Association of Colleges and Universities. He also directs the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources (TPS) program at Stanford University. Learn more at [http://sheq.stanford.edu](http://sheq.stanford.edu).

**Phase Two Reflection**

After reading the article, “Thinking Like a Historian” by Sam Wineburg, answer the following questions.

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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<td>Is historical thinking the same as critical thinking? Is it something that all students can do or is it limited by age or grade level? Why?</td>
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<td>What do your school test scores reveal about the reading comprehension level of your students?</td>
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<td>How do you think that social studies might be able to impact the reading comprehension level of your students?</td>
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<td>What are the similarities in the subjects of science, math, reading, literature, the arts and social studies?</td>
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<td>How can primary sources be used to help students to relate to current events?</td>
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The Challenge That’s Bigger Than Fake News
Civic Reasoning in a Social Media Environment

BY SARAH MCGREW, TERESA ORTEGA, JOEL BREAKSTONE, AND SAM WINEBURG

Since the November 2016 presidential election, coverage of “fake news” has been everywhere. It’s hard to turn on the TV without hearing the term. Google and Facebook have pitched plans for fighting the menace.1 State legislators have even introduced bills to mandate K–12 instruction on the topic.2

Fake news is certainly a problem. Sadly, however, it’s not our biggest. Fact-checking organizations like Snopes and PolitiFact can help us detect canards invented by enterprising Macedonian teenagers,3 but the Internet is filled with content that defies labels like “fake” or “real.” Determining who’s behind information and whether it’s worthy of our trust is more complex than a true/false dichotomy.

For every social issue, there are websites that blast half-true headlines, manipulate data, and advance partisan agendas. Some of these sites are transparent about who runs them and whom they represent. Others conceal their backing, portraying themselves as grassroots efforts.

Sarah McGrew co-directs the Civic Online Reasoning project at the Stanford History Education Group, where Teresa Ortega serves as the project manager. Joel Breakstone directs the Stanford History Education Group, where his research focuses on how teachers use assessment data to inform instruction. Sam Wineburg is the Margaret Jacks Professor of Education at Stanford University and the founder and executive director of the Stanford History Education Group.
Our “digital natives”† may be able to flit between Facebook and Twitter while simultaneously uploading a selfie to Instagram and texting a friend. But when it comes to evaluating information that flows through social media channels, they’re easily duped. Our exercises were not designed to assign letter grades or make hairsplitting distinctions between “good” and “better.” Rather, at each level, we sought to establish a reasonable bar that was within reach of middle school, high school, or college students. At each level, students fell far below the bar. 

Determining who’s behind information and whether it’s worthy of our trust is more complex than a true/false dichotomy. 

In what follows, we describe three of our assessments. Our findings are troubling. Yet we believe that gauging students’ ability to evaluate online content is the first step in figuring out how best to support them.

Assessments of Civic Online Reasoning

Our tasks measured three competencies of civic online reasoning—the ability to evaluate digital content and reach warranted conclusions about social and political issues: (1) identifying who’s behind the information presented, (2) evaluating the evidence presented, and (3) investigating what other sources say. Some of our assessments were paper-and-pencil tasks; others were administered online. For our paper-and-pencil assessments, we used screenshots of tweets, Facebook posts, websites, and other content that students encounter online. For our online tasks, we asked students to search for information on the web.

Who’s Behind the Information?

One high school task presented students with screenshots of two articles on global climate change from a national news magazine’s website. One screenshot was a traditional news story from the magazine’s “Science” section. The other was a post sponsored by an oil company, which was labeled “sponsored content” and prominently displayed the company’s logo. Students had to explain which of the two sources was more reliable.

Native advertisements—or ads craftily designed to mimic editorial content—are a relatively new source of revenue for news outlets. Native ads are intended to resemble the look of news stories, complete with eye-catching visuals and data displays. But, as with all advertisements, their purpose is to promote, not inform. Our task assessed whether students could identify who was behind an article and consider how that source might influence the article’s content. Successful students recognized that the oil company’s post was an advertisement for the company itself and reasoned that, because the company had a vested interest in fossil fuels, it was less likely to be an objective source than a news item on the same topic.

We administered this task to more than 200 high school students. Nearly 70 percent selected the sponsored content (which contained a chart with data) posted by the oil company as the more reliable source. Responses showed that rather than considering the source and purpose of each item, students were often taken in by the eye-catching pie chart in the oil company’s post. Although there was no evidence that the chart represented reliable data, students concluded that the post was fact-based. One student wrote that the oil company’s article was more reliable because “it’s easier to understand with the graph and seems...
more reliable because the chart shows facts right in front of you." Only 15 percent of students concluded that the news article was the more trustworthy source of the two. A similar task designed for middle school students yielded even more depressing results: 82 percent of students failed to identify an item clearly marked “sponsored content” as an advertisement. Together, findings from these exercises show us that many students have no idea what sponsored content means. Until they do, they are at risk of being deceived by interests seeking to influence them.

Evaluating Evidence
A task for middle school students tapped their ability to evaluate evidence. The Internet is filled with all kinds of claims—some backed by solid evidence and others as flimsy as air. Such claims abound in the comment sections of news articles. As online news sites have proliferated, their accompanying comment sections have become, as it were, virtual town halls, where users not only read, but debate, challenge, react, and engage publicly with fellow commenters. Our exercise assessed students’ ability to reason about the factors that make an online comment more or less trustworthy (see Sample Item below).

Students examined a comment posted on a news article about healthcare. We asked if they would use the information in a research paper. To be successful, students needed to recognize that they knew nothing about the commenter, “Joe Smith,” and his motivations for writing. Was he an expert on healthcare policy? Did he work for the Department of Health and Human Services? Adding to the dubiousness of Joe Smith’s comment was the fact that he provided no citation or links to support his claims. Without a sense of his credentials or the source for his statistics, the information he provided was virtually worthless.

Despite the many reasons to be skeptical, more than 40 percent of 201 middle school students said they would use Joe Smith’s information in a research paper. Instead of asking themselves whether the evidence he provided was sound, students saw a match between the information he presented and the topic at hand. They credulously took the numbers he provided at face value. Other students were entranced by the semblance of data in the comment and argued that the many statistics made the information credible. One student wrote that she would use the comment’s information “because the person included statistics that make me think this source is reliable.” Many middle school students, it seems, have an unflinching belief in the value of statistics—regardless of where the numbers come from.

Seeking Additional Sources
Another task tapped students’ ability to investigate multiple sources to verify a claim. Administered online, this task directed college students (as well as a group of Advanced Placement high school students) to an article on minimumwage.com about wages in the Danish and American fast-food industries. The article claimed that paying American workers more would result in increased food prices and unemployment. Students could consult any online source to determine whether the website was a reliable source of information on minimum wage policy.

The article bears all the trappings of credibility. It links to reports by the New York Times and the Columbia Journalism Review. It is published on a professional-looking website that features “Research” and “Media” pages that link to reports and news articles. The “About” page says it is a project of the Employment Policies Institute, “a non-profit research organization dedicated to studying public policy issues surrounding employment growth.” If students follow the link to the institute’s website (www.epionline.org), they encounter an even sleeker site with more research reports.

Indeed, if students never leave minimumwage.com or epionline.org, they are almost guaranteed to remain ignorant of the true authors of the sites’ content. To evaluate the article and the website on which it appears, students needed to leave those two sites and investigate what other sources had to say. If they did so, they likely learned that the institute is “run by a public relations firm

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**Sample Item**

Evaluating Online Comments

This post appeared in the comments section of a news article about the U.S. healthcare system:

Joe Smith

Percentage of men and women who survived cancer five years after diagnosis:

- U.S. 65%
- England 46%
- Canada 42%

Percentage of patients diagnosed with diabetes who received treatment within six months:

- U.S. 93%
- England 15%
- Canada 43%

Percentage of seniors needing hip replacement who received it within six months:

- U.S. 90%
- England 15%
- Canada 43%

You come across this comment while researching the U.S. healthcare system for a research paper. Would you use this information in your paper? Why or why not? __________
that also represents the restaurant industry, and that the owner of that firm has a record of creating “official-sounding nonprofit groups” to promote information on behalf of corporate clients. Eighty-five college students and 95 Advanced Placement U.S. history students completed this task. A mere 6 percent of college students and 9 percent of high school students identified the true backers of this article. The vast majority—college and high school students alike—accepted the website as trustworthy, citing its links, research, and parent group as reasons to trust it. As one student wrote: “I read the ‘About Us’ page for MinimumWage.com and also for the Employment Policies Institute. The Institute sponsors MinimumWage.com and is a non-profit research organization dedicated to studying policy issues surrounding employment, and it funds nonpartisan studies by economists around the nation. The fact that the organization is a non-profit, that it sponsors nonpartisan studies, and that it contains both pros and cons of raising the minimum wage on its website, makes me trust this source.”

Cloaked sites like epionline.org abound on the web. These professional-looking sites with neutral descriptions advocate on behalf of their parent organizations while actively concealing their true identities and funding. Our task shows how easily students are duped by these techniques.

Where to Go from Here?

Our findings show that many young people lack the skills to distinguish reliable from misleading information. If they fall victim to misinformation, the consequences may be dire. Credible information is to civic engagement what clean air and water are to public health. If students cannot determine what is trustworthy—if they take all information at face value without considering where it comes from—democratic decision-making is imperiled. The quality of our decisions is directly affected by the quality of information on which they are based.

What should we do? A quick survey of resources available on the web shows a surfeit of materials, all of which claim to help students evaluate digital information. Many of these resources share something in common: they provide checklists to help students decide whether information should be trusted. These checklists range in length from 10 questions to sometimes as many as 30. Short or long, checklist approaches tend to focus students on the most easily manipulated surface features of websites: Is a contact person provided for the article? Are sources of information identified? Are there spelling or grammatical errors? Are there banner ads? Does the domain name contain the suffix “.org” (supposedly more reliable than “.com”)?

Even if we set aside the concern that students (and the rest of us) lack the time and patience to spend 15 minutes answering lists of questions before diving into a website, a larger problem looms. Providing an author, throwing up a reference list, and ensuring a site is free of typos hardly establishes it as a credible source. One could contend that in years past, the designation “.org” (for a mission-driven organization) could be trusted more than “.com” (for a profit-driven company), but that’s no longer the case. Practically any organization, legitimate or not, can obtain a “.org” domain name. In an Internet characterized by polished web design, search-engine optimization, and organizations vying to appear trustworthy, such

Our findings show that many young people lack the skills to distinguish reliable from misleading information.
finding out what the rest of the web has to say (after all, that’s why we call it a web). In other words, students need to harness the power of the web to evaluate a single node in it. This was the biggest lesson we learned by watching expert fact checkers as they evaluated unfamiliar web content.

We interviewed journalists and fact checkers at some of the nation’s most prestigious news and fact-checking organizations as they vetted online content in real time. In parallel, we observed undergraduates at the nation’s most selective university, Stanford, and college professors at four-year institutions in California and Washington state as they completed the same set of online tasks. There were dramatic differences between the fact checkers and the other two groups.

Below, we describe some of the most powerful strategies employed by fact checkers and how educators can adapt them to help our students become savvy web users. (For examples of classroom activities that incorporate these strategies, see the box on page 9.)

1. **Teach students to read laterally.**

   College students and even professors approached websites using checklist-like behaviors: they scanned up and down pages, they commented on site design and fancy logos, they noted “.org” domain names, and they examined references at the bottom of a web article. They often spent a great deal of time reading the article, evaluating the information presented, checking its internal logic, or comparing what they read to what they already knew. But the “close reading” of a digital source, the slow, careful, methodical review of text online—when one doesn’t even know if the source can be trusted (or is what it says it is)—proves to be a colossal waste of time.

   Fact checkers approached unfamiliar content in a completely different way. They read laterally, hopping off an unfamiliar site almost immediately, opening new tabs, and investigating outside the site itself. They left a site in order to learn more about it. This may seem paradoxical, but it allowed fact checkers to leverage the strength of the entire Internet to get a fix on one node in its expansive web. A site like epionline.org stands up quite well to a close internal inspection: it’s well designed, clearly and convincingly written (if a bit short on details), and links to respected journalistic outlets. But a bit of lateral reading paints a different picture. Multiple stories come up in a search for the Employment Policies Institute that reveal the organization (and its creation, minimumwage.com) as the work of a Washington, D.C., public relations firm that represents the hotel and restaurant industries.

2. **Help students make smarter selections from search results.**

   In an open search, the first site we click matters. Our first impulse might send us down a road of further links, or, if we’re in a hurry, it might be the only venue we consult. Like the rest of us, fact checkers relied on Google. But instead of equating placement in search results with trustworthiness (the mistaken belief that the higher up a result, the more reliable), as college students tend to do, fact checkers understood how easily Google results can be gamed. Instead of mindlessly clicking on the first or second result, they exhibited click restraint, taking their time on search results, scrutinizing URLs and snippets (the short sentence accompanying each result) for clues. They regularly scrolled down to the bottom of the results page, sometimes even to the second or third page, before clicking on a result.

3. **Teach students to use Wikipedia wisely.**

   You read right: Wikipedia. Fact checkers’ first stop was often a site many educators tell students to avoid. What we should be doing instead is teaching students what fact checkers know about Wikipedia and helping them take advantage of the resources of the fifth-most trafficked site on the web.

   Students should learn about Wikipedia’s standards of verifiability and how to harvest entries for links to
reliable sources. They should investigate Wikipedia’s “Talk” pages (the tab hiding in plain sight next to the “Article” tab), which, on contentious issues like gun control, the status of Kashmir, waterboarding, or climate change, are gold mines where students can see knowledge-making in action. And they should practice using Wikipedia as a resource for lateral reading. Fact checkers, short on time, often skipped the main article and headed straight to the references, clicking on a link to a more established venue. Why spend 15 minutes having students, armed with a checklist, evaluate a website on a tree octopus (www.zapatopi.net/treeoctopus) when a few seconds on Wikipedia shows it to be “an Internet hoax created in 1998”?

While we’re on the subject of octopi: a popular approach to teaching students to evaluate online information is to expose them to hoax websites like the Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus. The logic behind this activity is that if students can see how easily they’re duped, they’ll become more savvy consumers. But hoaxes constitute a miniscule fraction of what exists on the web. If we limit our digital literacy lessons to such sites, we create the false impression that establishing credibility is an either-or decision—if it’s real, I can trust it; if it’s not, I can’t.

Instead, most of our online time is spent in a blurry gray zone where sites are real (and have real agendas) and decisions about whether to trust them are complex. Spend five minutes exploring any issue—from private prisons to a tax on sugary drinks—and you’ll find sites that mask their agendas alongside those that are forthcoming. We should devote our time to helping students evaluate such sites instead of limiting them to hoaxes.

The senior fact checker at a national publication told us what she tells her staff: “The greatest enemy of fact checking is hubris”—that is, having excessive trust in one’s ability to accurately pass judgment on an unfamiliar website. Even on seemingly innocuous topics, the fact checker says to herself, “This seems official; it may be or may not be. I’d better check.”

The strategies we recommend here are ways to fend off hubris. They remind us that our eyes deceive, and that we, too, can fall prey to professional-looking graphics, strings of academic references, and the allure of “.org” domains. Our approach does not turn students into cynics. It does the opposite: it provides them with a dose of humility. It helps them understand that they are fallible.

Our eyes deceive, and we can fall prey to professional-looking graphics, strings of academic references, and the allure of “.org” domains.

The web is a sophisticated place, and all of us are susceptible to being taken in. Like hikers using a compass to make their way through the wilderness, we need a few powerful and flexible strategies for getting our bearings, gaining a sense of where we’ve landed, and deciding how to move forward through treacherous online terrain. Rather than having students slog through strings of questions about easily manipulated features, we should be teaching them that the World Wide Web is, in the words of web-literacy expert Mike Caulfield, “a web, and the way to establish authority and truth on the web is to use the web-like properties of it.” This is what professional fact checkers do.

It’s what we should be teaching our students to do as well.

(Endnotes on page 39)
Fake News  
(Continued from page 9)

Endnotes


5. Urs Gasser, Sandra Cortesi, Momin Malik, and Ashley Lee, Youth and Digital Media: From Credibility to Information Quality (Cambridge, MA: Berkman Center for Internet and Society, 2012).


“The Challenge That’s Bigger Than Fake News”

Name: 

School/System:

**Phase Two Reflection**

After reading the article, “The Challenge That’s Bigger Than Fake News, answer the following questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How important are primary and secondary sources in determining the credibility of news?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What role does responsible consumption of information play in being civically responsible?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How can social studies provide opportunities to help student to obtain the skills necessary to distinguish reliable information from misleading information?</td>
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HUNGRY FOR HISTORY:

Teachers attending the June 2017 Selma, Alabama, Bicentennial Summer Institute stand with Jawana Jackson in front of the Jean Jackson House.
During summer 2017, almost 300 elementary school teachers across Alabama attended twelve new social studies professional development sessions. Hosted by the Alabama Bicentennial Commission (ABC), each workshop focused on training teachers to tell Alabama’s story through local history. At the Selma location, teachers explored the city’s connections to the Civil Rights Movement, making a stop at an old house on Lapsley Street along the way. It is located within a block of both Selma University and the home of civil rights activist Amelia Boynton, which African American educator Richard Byron Hudson built in 1906. As the teachers gathered around, owner Jawana Jackson recounted the house’s pivotal role in the Movement. In the 1960s, Jackson’s parents, Dr. Sullivan and Richie Jean Sherrod Jackson, hosted Southern Christian Leadership Conference leaders—including Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, and Andrew Young—as they organized the Selma to Montgomery March. Jackson indicated where her Uncle Martin once sat in their living room, which looked just as it had in 1965. Spellbound, some teachers had tears in their eyes. They had never known the house was there, let alone heard its story.

The visit to the house and the teachers’ reactions reflect the hunger Alabama’s elementary school teachers have for resources and opportunities to learn new stories from the state’s history and to share them with their students. Teachers often don’t have the time or resources to make connections with history, and opportunities for meaningful and engaging professional development in social studies are few and far between. With the advent of the 2001 federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), standardized testing results in reading and math dictated federal funding for schools. In turn, teacher professional development, instructional time, and content focused on reading and math at the expense of social studies, science, and the arts.¹
This had a deleterious effect on the teaching of history and social studies in Alabama. Because nearly three-fourths of the teachers surveyed during the Alabama Bicentennial Commission’s 2017 workshops began teaching after the implementation of NCLB, they only know an educational environment that marginalizes social studies. As a result, teachers reported a lack of time and training to find primary sources and lesson plans needed to teach the state’s history.

The lack of preparation to teach Alabama history, combined with neglect of the subject, only exacerbated the marginalization of social studies in Alabama. A 2017 survey of undergraduate elementary education programs at Alabama colleges and universities revealed a troubling lack of history coursework. Only three of the twenty-three programs surveyed require more than two college history courses. These programs typically limit history coursework to one or two general United States or world history classes; none requires a course in Alabama history. Data from ABC teacher surveys verify these findings, showing 67 percent of participating teachers took only one or two social studies (not even history) courses during their undergraduate careers. Only 23 percent of respondents felt their pre-service experience and coursework left them well-prepared to teach social studies compared to reading and math.

In preparation for the state’s 200th birthday in 2019, the Alabama Bicentennial Commission is in a position to transform social studies education in Alabama. Efforts launched in March 2017, the bicentennial anniversary of the Alabama Territory. The commemoration period will span three years and culminate with the Alabama Day celebration on the bicentennial of Alabama statehood, December 14, 2019. Prominent among a wide array of programming is a three-year emphasis on primary source-focused professional development and curriculum development. Bicentennial Commission programs combat the marginalization of social studies, improve the teaching of history, and provide teachers in all sixty-seven of the state’s counties with resources and support to foster critical thinking skills, promote digital literacy, and encourage civic understanding in the classroom.

Designed to train 360 teachers from 2017 through 2019, the professional development program focuses on teaching Alabama history across the curriculum in third through fifth grades. The workshops emphasize cross-curricular connections with technology, language arts, science, and math. Modeled on highly successful National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) summer institutes for school teachers, our program incorporates visits to Alabama historic sites, engagement with primary sources, and guest lectures. As with NEH workshops, participants receive stipends and supplementary resources. To keep elementary school teachers engaged, we emphasize an alternating schedule of brief lectures and hands-on activities that model engagement with primary sources and historical thinking.

The structure of the professional development program also draws on the results of the Alabama History Education Initiative through teacher interviews and training led by Susan DuBose, Alabama Bicentennial Commission education coordinator. (She also led the Alabama History Education Initiative.) Each workshop includes instruction on the differences between primary and secondary sources. In addition, because DuBose’s research found that teachers who used primary sources treated them with absolute authority and failed to include multiple perspectives and account for bias when using them, we also taught the importance of using a variety of sources.

The professional development program began with the selection of a dozen master teachers based on exemplary classroom performance and expertise. Each represents a different region of the state. In July 2016, DuBose led this group through an intensive week of pedagogy, field trips to historic sites, and lessons in Alabama history. Afterward, the master teachers collaborated with our staff and an assigned content specialist—often historians from local colleges and universities—to create professional development sessions. Each master teacher and content specialist built a three- and-a-half-day experience for thirty teachers. Though the content and activities varied by location, workshops follow a basic structure: day one focuses on acquainting participants with the basics of Alabama history; day two features field trips; day three is a pedagogy day; and day four, a half-day, is a presentation and collaboration day. The master teacher leads the sessions; content specialists provide expertise, answer questions, and debunk myths; and guest speakers present special topics. Since teachers are usually expected to pay for supplies and training themselves, demonstrating understanding of their limited finances is one way we communicate our commitment to them as professionals. Therefore, we provide participants with materials, books, a stipend, and lunch.

Through professional development, we provide teachers with resources to teach Alabama’s history through their own communities. In 2017, the program’s content focused on the importance of local places and stories. Each workshop featured trips to local historic sites and cultural institutions. In Thomasville, participants explored the history of Alabama’s Black Belt in Wilcox County, with visits to historic Camden, Black Belt Treasures Cultural Arts Center, and the Gee’s Bend Quilters Collective. Teachers at Fort Payne discovered the area’s Cherokee connections by visiting Trail of Tears sites and experiencing the sacred site Manitou Cave. Each of the sites were little-known to the workshop participants. Visiting these cultural and historic sites exposed teachers to new stories from their communities that they were excited to take back to their classrooms. One teacher at Selma responded that her experience “ignited a fire and a sense of urgency to learn more about MY history.”

Teachers often collaborated with historians from local colleges and universities to create professional development sessions.
Historians’ participation is vital to the success of the program. Their expertise prompts difficult conversations and pushes teachers to view history in different ways. At the Auburn workshop, historian of slavery Kelly Kennington engaged participants in analysis of bills of sale of enslaved persons. She also walked the group through Works Progress Administration (WPA) slave narratives from a county in the Auburn area. Kennington’s choices hit home when two teachers from that county noticed that the last names of the slave owners in the narratives were those of students at their school. The discovery led to lively discussion of problems with using WPA slave narratives and how to modify them for use in elementary classrooms by removing dialect and editing out names. The tension in the room was palpable and teachers left unsure of whether they would feel comfortable using the narratives. But they had engaged critically with the documents.

We also constantly encourage engagement with primary sources through cross-curricular, hands-on activities. One activity uses programmable robots to teach the history of Alabama’s five capitals. Students employ basic coding skills to make the robots travel chronologically to each capital along a print of an 1833 Alabama map. Thus, students not only use technology and problem-solving skills, but they also engage with a primary source. Breakout EDU boxes (breakoutedu.com), modeled on the escape-room concept, are another wildly popular activity. We hired an instructional coach to create Alabama history-themed game boxes. Using creativity, teamwork, and critical thinking, players break into the boxes using primary sources to solve puzzles to crack the locks. One survey respondent at Fort Payne stated that the workshop encouraged her to “implement a more hands-on method in my social studies class instead of just reading straight from the book.” A respondent from Dothan noted that unlike other workshops she attended, ours “had many activities and ideas that I will take back and use in my classroom,” while another mentioned that she would begin incorporating history activities into her math classes. So that resources reach as many teachers as possible, we have participants share an activity with colleagues at their schools. We require them to provide documentation of their presentation. This fall, we’ve reached 308 additional teachers from 15 schools.
began with documents from that era. As the architect of the primary source sets, I’m responsible for producing four to five sets of fifty documents per year through the end of 2019, covering topics such as: World War I, agriculture, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Progressive Era. The program initially emphasized producing lesson plans using the primary source sets. Surveys reported that many teachers lacked instructional time to use full lesson plans, so we are transitioning to producing quick activities that will encourage historical investigation and critical thinking. We plan to recruit and compensate teachers to submit activities that use items from our document packages and introduce or augment classroom topics. Activities will be hosted on our website and at the Alabama Learning Exchange, a well-known repository for classroom resources.

The influence of the Alabama History Education Initiative also carries over to the curriculum project. Much of its teacher training focused on telling national and global stories through Alabama primary sources. We continue to use this approach, highlighting the state’s key roles in events ranging from Indian removal, the Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the space program. This project brings Alabama stories to life through primary sources that were previously unknown and inaccessible to teachers. While our programs primarily serve grades three through five, the curriculum project provides documents matched to content standards for grades six through twelve as well. However, when selecting documents, I consider students in grades three through five as the primary audience. Photographs, images, and artifacts are excellent sources for elementary students.1

In many cases, the most useful primary sources aren’t available online. Therefore, incorporating primary sources from archives around Alabama has also led to the creation of a small-scale digitization program. Building the Space and Technology packet required multiple trips to the Huntsville area to access NASA-related primary sources. Portable scanner in hand, I’ve combed the archives at the U.S. Space and Rocket Center, the University of Alabama in Huntsville, and Alabama A&M University, and plan to visit other institutions as the project progresses. I process the images, compose the metadata, and send the repository the original and altered versions for their own use. Using these documents mined from archives across the state, we envision creating an online database of hundreds of curated primary sources.

Despite an emphasis on accessibility, providing access to the primary source packets has been challenging. The packets originated as spreadsheets, which were visually unappealing and difficult to distribute. We instead sought an eye-catching format that would allow maximum accessibility, easy skimming of primary sources, and visibility of content standards to minimize search time. When the commission hired a design firm to build a website, we agreed that the packets should be housed there, rather than on a separate website, but creating the database has been plagued with delays and communication issues. With a grant award, our objectives changed during the design process, requiring reconfiguration to drive site traffic to archival repositories rather than allow teachers to download documents from our website. I worked closely with our webmaster to bend the design firm’s content management system to our will, tweaking metadata fields, page layouts, and image sizes to suit teachers’ needs. At the time of this writing, the early Alabama history packet is now live after six months of wrestling with the content management system. With the back end of the database complete, we can easily add new packets and expect World War I, Space and Technology, and Civics packets to be available by December 2017.

As we near the end of the first full year of programming, it is clear to us that Alabama teachers are desperate for time and resources to teach social studies. Treating teachers as professionals and giving them the support they deserve is crucial to their success and that of our programs. But more than that, it’s essential to the success of our state. We can’t afford to ignore social studies, particularly at the elementary level. We envision creating such a demand for history education resources that our initiatives outlive the bicentennial commemoration, but this will be possible only if attitudes toward social studies education change. Shining the light on a cross-curricular approach to Alabama history has ignited excitement about social studies that we’re ready to harness. We know that giving elementary school teachers tools to explore our state’s difficult history will get primary sources into classrooms and plant historical inquiry skills in the minds of students. For now, our job is to keep building and to shine a light in every corner of Alabama. Through the bicentennial, every child in every school should be able to see themselves in our state’s history and feel that they belong here. As history professionals, we owe it to them, and we owe it to the future of Alabama.

Caroline Gibbons is the Education Program Specialist for the Alabama Bicentennial Commission in Montgomery, Alabama. Caroline received a B.A. in History in 2013 and an M.A. in history with an Archival Studies Certificate in 2016, both from Auburn University. She is passionate about Alabama history and forging a bright future for all Alabamians. She can be reached at caroline.gibbons@archives.alabama.gov.


2 All quotes derive from post-session evaluations compiled by the Alabama Bicentennial Commission.

3 When I select a handwritten document, I always include a transcription to facilitate ease of use in the classroom.
“Hungry for History: Bringing Social Studies Back to Alabama”

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>School/System:</th>
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**Phase Two Reflection**

After reading the article, *Hungry for History: Bringing Social Studies Back to Alabama* by Caroline J. Gibbons, answer the following questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you consider to be the main goals of social studies in your school?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you use a mentor program in your school? Why or why not?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much professional development is offered to your teachers? Is it school based or system based professional development?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you survey your teachers after professional development sessions to find out what they find to be useful?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are barriers to successful social studies instruction in your school?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discuss something that you learned in this professional development that you found to be thought-provoking.</td>
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