

# Promoting Growth of Historical Thinking Skills

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**Abstract:** This manuscript addresses the need for developing historical thinking skills for students in social studies, specifically in the high school setting. The goal is for students to learn the material like historians would rather than through memorization. This article explores methods in which to foster critical thinking skills and, thus, support students in thinking like historians. Methods include group-based assignments, different approaches for teaching vocabulary, work with primary sources, and relating the content to students' everyday experiences. Overall, these methods are important for improving a student's capability of historical thinking.

## Introduction

How can we, as social studies teachers, improve our students' analytical skills and overall higher learning? This is a question I have often pondered throughout my year of student teaching. Often, students in history are only taught to memorize names and dates. This cannot be our goals as teachers. History is fluid, meaning that it is continuous in the fact that the past shapes the present and the present shapes the future. To truly understand ourselves and our situations, we must look to the past. No, better yet, we must understand the past. Understanding the significance of the past allows us to better understand the present, and possibly find patterns to predict the future. In order to do this, we must look beyond basic knowledge and start considering the significance of events and people. Rather than asking questions such as "When did the Communists take over China?" We should be asking, "How does the communist revolution in China affect China's current status today?"

Teaching the significance of events and how students are to examine and evaluate ideas in history is challenging but necessary. If we cannot enable our students to do this, we cannot connect them to history, and if we cannot connect them to history, not only will there be no need for social studies teachers, but also students will not understand the significance of humanity. Classes like psychology and sociology not only enable students to understand more about themselves but about others from different backgrounds as well. Don't we as educators strive for diversity? For our students to be exposed to the world as it is so that they may change it to the world we want it to be. These courses also allow students to develop sympathy and empathy. With these courses, students may not agree with others' positions, but they will understand others more and be able to cope with the stress that life gives all of us.

Why else should we strive for historical thinking? I can answer this from my own experience. First as historians (amateurs or professionals), we know the importance and the priority of primary source documents. But often, primary source documents use language techniques that we are not familiar with. Not only that sources must be translated if it is written in a different language, but also even sources in a familiar language may use a different dialect or words that are not in regular use today. There are plenty of primary sources, such as the Declaration of

Independence or Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, that use words that students would be unfamiliar with or do not give context clues.

Another kind of primary source we as social studies teachers use often is political cartoons. Political cartoons give us a better perspective of what the public (or the cartoonist) thought of the current times. These are also important since newspaper companies still use political cartoons today. In my own experience however, many of my students struggle to understand them.

For example, a political cartoon that was created during the Great Depression depicts President Hoover as a mother as he is trying to deal with the many issues during the depression represented as babies (see <https://www.nps.gov/features/shen/2019/hoover/lesson-2/map/rapidan-camp/prime-minister.html>). That the artist was a supporter of Hoover is indicated by how he depicts the Democrats' reaction to the depression while not helping find any solutions. This was what I had hoped to see as an answer on an assessment when students were asked, what was the significance of the cartoon? The question was worth two points, one for what Hoover was doing and the other for what the DNC was doing in the image. Instead, the graph in figure 1 shows a summary of the class scores.

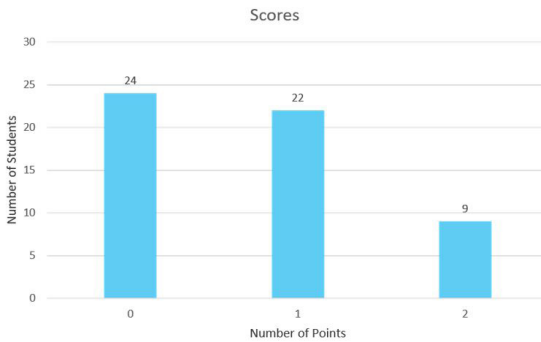


Figure 1. Class scores on a two-point question about a political cartoon.

As you can see, many did not reach the goal of understanding the political importance of the cartoon. I acknowledge that satire in either written form or visual aids is harder to detect compared to when it is spoken, but students still need to learn these as it enables them to pick on different forms of communication. Now that the need for historical thinking skills in social studies are in need, how do we as teachers employ our students to develop these skills?

There have been many topics that researchers have used to address this question. They can be categorized into two main sections. The first is about how group work can contribute not only to collaboration but can foster higher order thinking. The second part will consist of the importance of teaching vocabulary using content literacy methods. Finally, teachers must be ready to ask thought provoking questions to promote historical thinking.

## Group Work

There are many approaches to group work that teachers can implement. Yusmanto, Soetjipto and Djatmika (2017) examined two different kinds of group activities

known as carousel feedback and round table. Carousel feedback is an approach that groups students together to answer a question posed by the teacher. This is followed by peer review as student's comment on each other's responses. Round table, on the other hand, is when students are paired together in heterogeneous groups and given a problem or question that has multiple answers. This approach is designed to be either restricted (only selected answers) or extended response (multiple answers or no wrong answers). Students record everyone's answers and decide on one answer, explanation, or solution as a group. The purpose of the study was to give an "opportunity for students to work in groups to discuss and understand issues, problems, and concepts to remember facts, beliefs, information, and/or agreements" (p. 40). The study was implemented in three cycles, each to repeat the experiment of both methods and to make any necessary changes in-between each cycle.

The results show that over many cycles, each method increased student scores and the students were able to answer questions that asked them to evaluate and analyze text or other forms of information. The research showed that at the end of the first cycle, only a third of the students reached the goal that the researchers were looking for. However, at the conclusion of the third cycle, over 86% of students reached the target level of higher order thinking skills (defined as analysis, evaluation, or creation on Bloom's taxonomy). The researchers concluded that as long as either carousel feedback or round table methods are accompanied by "giving time for students to think, provide scaffolding, observing students' activity, asking questions, asking questions, discussing in groups, analyzing the results, and providing feedback are the examples of activities that should be familiarized" (p. 39). The fact that the students were able to develop their thinking by using either methods illustrates the importance of students working together and sharing ideas and feedback.

## Content Area Literacy

Group work can only do so much though. In order to have students able to respond to higher learning questions, we must first look at one of the major barriers: vocabulary. Vocabulary should not be a barrier and is essential in any field, especially social studies. Often, students are told to either look words up or write down their definitions. This can only do so much though, as they do not have any practice using these new words. Often students feel disconnected because they do not understand the vocabulary and will give up instantly. This should be no surprise as many use social media. Many articles, news clippings, and videos are short so students are used to scrolling through information fast and do not grasp a deep meaning of anything. This is why many YouTube videos are less than 15 minutes long as it keeps its viewer's attention since the attention spans are diminishing.

There are approaches, however, that combine group activity with a focus on vocabulary. One method is RAFT (role, audience, format, and topic). Put into practice a geography teacher can use this for their students to teach them the importance of geographic features. Students can make a brochure of a place for travelers as they take on the role of a travel guide. Incorporating the rules of raft, their role is to be a tour guide, their audience are tourists, they are visiting a country for the first time through a brochure (format), telling them the top ten sites they should visit and why they are important/significant (topic) (Alexander-Shea, 2011).

## ***Primary Sources***

Another thing that is important in history is the use of primary sources. Yet, this can also be another barrier for students in high school. Primary sources “may seem more difficult than textbook reading, because, unlike textbooks, the political speeches were intended not to create an understandable story for [modern day] students, but to speak directly to the people and issues of former times” (Newmann, 1990, p. 264).

Carpenter, Earhart and Achugar, (2014) conducted a study to investigate how to help teachers in a multilingual classroom with comprehension of primary documents. In this instance, the two documents examined were Section 13 of Virginia’s Declaration of Rights and the second was the Second Amendment in the United States Constitution. To start the lesson, the teacher put images of both authors (George Mason and Thomas Jefferson) and projected them on the board. He asked them if anyone knew who they were. He then stated the objective of the lesson to his students. In this case, it was to find the origins of America’s ideas in a political format and what kinds of language the founding fathers used. On his response sheet, the teacher asked what differences were between the two documents, specifically, what each document included that the other left out. To put in a portion of evaluation, he then asked them if Section 13 of Virginia’s Declaration of Rights was the actual Second Amendment, how would that change America today? Many students’ responses were on track as they examined that had this been the case gun laws and ownership would have been much stricter. They also examined that words such as peace can have different meanings in different contexts.

## ***Detecting Bias***

Historians also know that any kind of source will have bias at different degrees. Detecting bias is another important component in determining the validity of a source. So how can we as teachers show our students how to look out for it? Malik (2005) examined a lesson using primary sources on the Industrial Revolution in England. She started the lesson with a concept map with the entire class to try to define bias. In her study, she mentions that the students answered correctly that is someone’s belief, opinion, or their preference. She then proceeded with the concept map pointing out how they can detect bias. The students pointed out through negative words, put-downs, or the distortion of truth that the author can use). The teacher then chooses an example of how to detect bias. She says her thoughts aloud as she examines the primary document. The example she used was from a member of British Parliament stating the horrible conditions of factory work, especially for child labor. She underlines the adjectives the author uses to describe the conditions. She points out to the students that these words help put imagery to make the reader know the experience of smell and what one would here in a factory. She then followed up with another piece in which the students would have their own practice independently. Students referred to their concept maps on what aspects they should see in primary documents. She used a think-pair-share method giving students had time to think about the passage using their concept map. The students were able to detect bias line by line in a source.

## Asking Thought Provoking Questions

The final step we must do as educators of social studies is address questions with more questions that enable students to think historically. For example, in a lesson on the Battle of New Orleans, a teacher used many sources from songs, paintings, historical accounts, and a handful of primary sources (Nokes, 2010). One of his students looked at her teacher frustrated.

“I don’t know why we have to study the song. It doesn’t tell us anything about the battle.”

“Does the fact that a best-selling song about the battle was written 150 years later tell us anything about it?”

“I guess that it means that this battle is really famous?”

“Yeah, I think that the Battle of New Orleans has become an important part of American pop culture. Is there anything else in the other documents that might support this idea?” (p. 63-64)

With this question, she is able to relate the song to a painting of Andrew Jackson and text stating he became a national hero. It is responses like these is what all social studies teachers must be prepared for.

## Conclusion

So, what can teachers do if they want to have their students be able to think historically? Social Studies teachers must ask more thought-provoking questions that require discussion. They must also be ready to model how they decipher the significance of text and compare it to things that a student will understand. We must also use strategies such as RAFT or others to boost vocabulary that is crucial in the understanding of historical documents. Implementing these strategies such as RAFT in the form of a brochure, or perhaps creating a skit, will help students connected to the material. We are not trying for our students to memorize facts, but like historians, discover them, make connections, and come up with their own explanations that can be challenged.

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### **About the Author**

Brian Trogus is a LAMP student getting his master's in secondary education with a concentration in social studies at the University of Toledo. He also has a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Toledo. He has worked as an intern for a museum and loves football season.