Teaching the Skill of Contextualizing in History

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ABSTRACT. Contextualization, the act of placing events in a proper context, allows teachers to weave a rich, dynamic portrait of a historical period for their students. As teachers strive to identify enduring themes and patterns, they must teach students to appreciate the particular policies, institutions, worldviews, and circumstances that shape a given moment in time. However, contextualized historical thinking runs counter to the narratives and frameworks that many students bring to class. Not only have many young people internalized timeless, psychologized notions of why people behaved as they did in the past, but they have also absorbed powerful stories through popular culture. Challenging long-standing historical frameworks takes time, and educators must give students multiple opportunities to practice and apply their new knowledge and skills. In this article, the authors describe three activities that help students think contextually as they read historical documents: (1) providing background knowledge, (2) asking guiding questions, and (3) explicitly modeling contextualized thinking.

Keywords: contextualized thinking, guiding questions, history

On July 27, 1919, race riots triggered by the drowning of an African American youth (who had accidentally entered the “white section” of Lake Michigan) broke out in Chicago. The violence left dozens of people dead, both black and white, and hundreds of black homes destroyed. Ask today’s high school students the cause of such violence, and they will answer with a confidence one rarely hears in a history class: racism and hate, the same racism and hatred that lies at the root of black slavery, the Native American Trail of Tears, racial segregation, and Japanese internment. Some students will claim that society has improved since then; others will insist it is virtually unchanged. At either end of the spectrum, for these young people, the past is monolithic and fixed, easy to characterize and easier to judge.

Although deep-seated racism, as seen in countless contemporary examples, was an undeniable factor in the Chicago 1919 race riots, this incident can only be understood against the backdrop of its particular historical context. Among other factors, this context includes the crowded conditions of Chicago’s South Side, caused by the recent migration of nearly one hundred thousand African Americans from the South; the end of World War I and the subsequent replacement of black workers with returning white soldiers; the poverty of Chicago factory workers; and the prevalence of gangs. Contextualization, the act of placing an event in its proper context—within the web of personalities, circumstances, and occurrences that surrounds it—allows teachers to weave a rich, dynamic portrait of a historical period for their students. As teachers strive to identify enduring themes and patterns, they must teach students to appreciate the particular policies, institutions, worldviews, and circumstances that shape a given moment in time.
Teaching Contextualized Thinking

Contextualized historical thinking runs counter to the narratives and frameworks that many students bring to class. Not only have many young people internalized timeless, psychologized notions of why people hate, but they have also absorbed powerful stories through popular culture. Challenging longstanding historical frameworks takes time, and students must be given multiple opportunities to practice and apply their new knowledge and skills. In this article, we describe three activities that help students improve their contextualized thinking as they read historical documents: (1) providing background knowledge, (2) asking guiding questions, and (3) explicitly modeling contextualized thinking.

We draw on materials from our Web site, http://historicalthinkingmatters.org. Historical Thinking Matters is a collaboration between Stanford University’s History Education Group and the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, with funding provided by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Each of the four content modules on our site is designed as a historical inquiry in which students read multiple documents and formulate a response to an authentic historical question. For example, the Rosa Parks/civil rights inquiry asks students, “Why did the boycott of Montgomery’s buses succeed?” and the Scopes trial inquiry prompts them to consider, “How was the Scopes trial more complicated than a debate between evolutionists and creationists?” Both questions direct students away from knee-jerk responses and require that they read the documents carefully to construct a richer understanding of the necessary context of each.

The understandings that many students bring to the Montgomery bus boycott and the Scopes trial represent classic cases of decontextualized thinking. Students typically believe that Rosa Parks was a “tired old seamstress” who single-handedly ignited the Montgomery Bus Boycott (Kohl 2007). Few are aware that Montgomery was the seat of a politically mobilized African American community that had begun agitating for equal seating years before Parks refused to relinquish her seat (Robinson 1987). Alternately, the Scopes trial presents a different sort of decontextualized thinking. Thanks to the classic 1960 movie Inherit the Wind, many students view the Scopes trial as an age-old battle between evolution and creationism. Unless pressed to consider historical context, students miss the fact that the trial was also shaped by the cultural turbulence of the 1920s, the rise of popular culture, and the politics of public schooling. Although the tension between evolutionists and creationists persists, 1925 was not “just like” today.

**Background Knowledge**

Contextualized historical thinking is impossible to accomplish without background knowledge. One need not know everything about a historical moment, but a basic chronology and some familiarity with key developments are fundamental. Years of research have shown the importance of prior knowledge in helping people make inferences as they read (Anderson 2005). In the case of history, however, the automatic application of prior knowledge may cause students to miss key differences between past and present. Background information allows students to decipher unfamiliar terms and create accurate mental images as they read. Because teachers cannot expect students to know how certain words were defined in the past or how today’s institutions differed, such information must be provided.

The Rosa Parks and Scopes trial modules provide this relevant background knowledge. For example, the launching page for each module features a timeline and a minidocumentary that sets the scene for the inquiry. The Rosa Parks video clip situates the Montgomery bus boycott within the context of segregation; the Scopes trial movie locates events in the social and cultural tensions of the 1920s. Both timelines include events that students may initially regard as irrelevant—for the Scopes trial, the ratification of women’s suffrage in 1920, and in the case of the bus boycott, U.S. involvement in World War II. Ultimately, however, these timelines remind students that historical events cannot be viewed in isolation, but instead constitute one thread in a larger tapestry of events that characterizes a historical period.

However, students require more than chronologies. Professional historians can provide relevant information that students may not know. One of the documents in our Scopes trial inquiry, a cartoon, suggests that the town of Dayton, Tennessee, took advantage of the publicity surrounding the trial. When students click play, they can hear historian Mike O’Malley of George Mason University explain,

> The 1920s might be the high watermark for newspapers... It was also the decade of what they called “civic boosterism,” the idea that you needed to boost your town, and talk it up and hype its prospects, talk about how “Smallville is moving forward” or “Mudville, the City of Progress”... There was a whole novel, Sinclair Lewis's novel, *Babbitt*... dedicated to making fun of 1920s peppy boosterism. Dayton is right in on that; the town leaders wanted to get the town in the news to show that it was a modern, energetic, peppy, forward-looking community.

The idea that 1920s civic boosterism fueled the trial—that city leaders purposely flouted Tennessee’s Butler Law to attract attention and publicity—may shock modern listeners tempted to view the Scopes trial as an earlier incarnation of contemporary debate. Providing students with background knowledge opens an entirely new interpretation for them to consider.

**Guiding Questions**

Just as teachers want students to bring historical context to their reading of a historical document, they would also like students to generate context from the text. Students can learn a lot about history when they slow down the reading process and attend carefully to source information and language. Teachers can design guiding questions that point students toward important information and allow them to generate
knowledge about an event or era's historical context.

There is an important distinction between guiding questions and the identification and recall questions that students generally encounter in their textbooks. Most students are highly skilled at answering textbook questions without having to read the chapter. Few questions require students to identify a source and ask interpretive questions about it. In appendix A we prove that Rosa Parks did not solely initiate the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, and we ask students to help them generate that interpretation as they read the letter. These questions (shown in appendix B) encourage students to consider the date of the letter, infer Robinson's purpose in writing to the mayor, and use those answers to challenge the commonly held belief that Rosa Parks caused the boycott.

In the Scopes module, we wanted students to appreciate the broader tensions between the big cities and small towns of the 1920s. The technological advances and modern trends that characterized cities at the turn of the century widened the chasm between rural and urban dwellers. Urbanites felt disdainful of what they believed were the backward ways of small-town America, whereas country folk felt threatened by what they understood to be the corrupt forces of modernity. Again, rather than hand students this historical context, we wanted them to generate the knowledge by carefully reading the documents. Our guiding questions help scaffold this process.

In one document from 1925, evangelical preacher John Roach Straton contrasts the vice and crime of New York City and Chicago with the upstanding morality of small towns, “where women are still honored, where men are chivalric, where laws are respected, where home life is still sweet, where the marriage vow is still sacred” (qtd. in Moran 2002, 212). We ask students to identify the words Straton used to describe small towns and to interpret his view of cities. We then ask them to apply this information as they revisit the inquiry question: “How was the Scopes trial more complicated than a simple debate between evolutionists and creationists?” (For these questions, please see http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/scopestrial/0/inquiry/main/questions/42). Carefully designed guiding questions allow students to generate evidence-based interpretations of historical documents and, in this case, of a specific historical context.

**Modeling Conceptualized Thinking:**

**Expert Think-Alouds**

Historical thinking is by its very nature invisible. If teachers want students to learn how to think contextually, they must show them what this thinking sounds like. Thus, the third tool used to develop students' conceptualized thinking is the expert think-aloud. The think-aloud has been most commonly used in cognitive research to capture “online” cognitive processes (Ericsson and Simon 1993). The method asks participants to report what they are thinking, doing, and feeling as they perform certain tasks. This method has been used to help make explicit human thinking about a wide range of tasks, including reading historical texts (e.g., Wineburg 1991), interfacing with an unfamiliar piece of technology (e.g., Dillow 1997), and making decisions about what products to purchase (e.g., Reicks et al. 2003).

On our Web site, we transformed the think-aloud from a research method into an instructional tool. We drew on an instructional model called *cognitive apprenticeship* developed by Allan Collins, John Seely Brown, and Susan E. Newman (1989) and Allan Collins, John Seely Brown, and Ann Holum (1991), which we adapted for our purposes (Martin and Wineburg 2008). The model draws a distinction between traditional apprenticeships—for example, tailoring or midwifery—and cognitive apprenticeships, where the goal is to make expert thinking and mental processes visible to the novice. In a tailor's shop, expert skills are easily observable; in the classroom, the historian's skills are invisible unless a concerted effort is made to surface them, which is precisely what we aimed to do.

At various points in the inquiries, historians are shown thinking aloud as they...
read the same historical documents students read. Each think-aloud is accompanied by a commentary that identifies the reading strategies demonstrated by the expert historian. Whereas some strategies may involve the application of specialized content knowledge, others are relatively straightforward. For example, in the Rosa Parks model we included a think-aloud by Professor Fred Astren of San Francisco State University reading a speech of Martin Luther King Jr. from March 1956, nearly four months into the boycott (see appendix C). As the historian reads the speech, he notes its language and Biblical imagery and imagines King’s audience, tired and in need of inspiration (see http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/rosparks/0/inquiry/main/resources/24).

After students watch and listen to Astren’s reading, they can listen to the following commentary to help them identify the strategies he has just modeled:

By putting this document in his mental timeline, Fred imagines that by March 1956, three-and-a-half months into the boycott, the Montgomery boycotters were probably tired and possibly even discouraged. People had been walking for months, many had been arrested, and King’s home had been bombed. Fred wonders if King’s speech about sacrifice was necessary to keep some people from giving up... Fred imagines that the audience would trust a religious leader who saw the world in the same way and shared their faith. By understanding King’s audience and the context in which he spoke, Fred is better able to understand why King would have chosen these specific words to address them and what King hoped to achieve.

In this instance, Astren possesses no more background knowledge than the average student. Rather, he applies his understanding of human nature by imagining King’s exhausted audience and imagining that they needed words of inspiration. This “imaginative reconstruction,” to use R. G. Collingwood’s (1946, 37) phrase, allows Astren to begin building a sophisticated model of the events of the Montgomery bus boycott.

Contextualized thinking sometimes requires the simple acknowledgment of one’s ignorance. This specification of ignorance (Wineburg 1998) allows readers to mark all the places where they need more information to draw clearer conclusions. Even when they lack crucial pieces of background knowledge, students can learn to wonder. In the Scopes module, we feature a think-aloud by Professor Joy Williamson of the University of Washington in which, while reading a statement issued in support of Scopes by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), she wonders why the AFT supported him (see http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/scopes/trial/0/inquiry/main/resources/41). Williamson muses,

I’m wondering if this is teachers banding together against the legislature and legislative interference in what happens in the schools... And so I’m wondering if that plays a role in why the AFT banded together in support of Scopes... I wonder about... the AFT and why they made this particular decision and if it has anything to do with interference in the business of teaching.

In the accompanying commentary highlighting Williamson’s questions, we wanted students to recognize how sophisticated historical reading often begins by posing questions:

If you pay close attention to Professor Williamson’s language, you will see that she uses the word wonder three different times. You may regard historians as people with bundles of answers, but here Professor Williamson demonstrates a different kind of historical expertise. She is an expert at formulating questions. She is an expert not because she reads quickly but because she reads slowly. She slows down the reading process so that when she gets to the bottom of the document, she brings a set of questions and a prepared mind.

The think-aloud and accompanying commentary simultaneously model and demystify the processes of historical and contextualized thinking.

The Long Road

The development of contextualized thinking takes time and requires students to practice and apply new skills across multiple texts. This is not a reason for discouragement, but evidence of the sophistication and value of historical thinking. Naturally, students develop at different paces and achieve varying levels of contextualized thinking. We observed as much in our review of dozens of student essays gathered in response to the various inquiry questions on our Web site. In the teacher section of our Web site, each unit features samples of student work along with our commentary. Such samples show students at different stages of development encountering the complexity of historical argument.

Recall that the Rosa Parks documents challenge the traditional narrative wherein a woman’s solitary act of defiance single-handedly triggered the Montgomery bus boycott. With careful reading, some students who used the Web site significantly shifted their narratives to appreciate the broader context from which the boycott emerged. Jo Ann Robinson's letter offers compelling evidence that Montgomery’s African American community had been agitating for desegregation of the city’s buses for more than a year before Parks’ protest. As we noted earlier, our guiding questions point students to the Robinson letter and provide hints to challenge the idea that Parks alone started the boycott.

Still, even after carefully reading and considering each document, not every student achieved this goal. Consider the excerpts taken from two student essays on the boycott shown in figure 1. Both draw on the Robinson letter as evidence of the community’s unity and organization. However, only student A demonstrates an understanding that the date of the letter challenges the popular narrative about Parks, whereas student B invokes the myth of Parks, calling her a “quaint African American woman” (in fact, given her training at Myles Horton’s Highlander School for community organizing, Parks was anything but quaint) who “unknowingly initiated” the boycott. This student essentially grafts new information onto a preexisting story and in so doing violates its chronological sequence. Robinson makes an appearance, but it is only a cameo, leaving the more familiar Parks narrative intact.
It is very common to hear that the incident, where Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man, is what started the Montgomery Bus Boycott. However, this is not the case. Though Rosa Parks’ arrest was the crowning incident in the history of civil rights and may have been what got the boycott started, the plans for a bus boycott had been talked about months earlier. This event was a highly organized and determined effort and planned through very carefully.

A year before the boycott, discussions of changing the bus laws were proposed to the Montgomery City Council. These propositions were addressed, but only some of the laws were slightly changed. “Busses have begun stopping on more corners where negroes live than previously. However, the same practices in seating and boarding continue.” (Letter from JoAnn Robinson, President of the Women’s Political Council)

As student B’s essay shows, growth in contextualized thinking is more complicated than simply composing a document set and exposing students to models of sophisticated thinking. Learning to read for context is a zig-zagging process in which students retain prior ways of reading while trying out new and unfamiliar ways of thinking. Success for some is steady, whereas for others it requires numerous passes and much patience. In all cases, students need multiple examples and guided practice to understand how a consideration of context will give a more sophisticated understanding of the past.

Conclusion

Our approach to historical thinking follows a different path than do other Web sites that offer historical materials and primary sources. Instead of hurling students into the raging waters of the Internet, we teach them to perfect their stroke in a managed environment by offering carefully selected units on key historical events, organized around a straightforward historical question. Today’s young people have grown up in a world of screens; for them, print is something that flashes by and disappears. Fed a diet of endlessly moving text, they need to slow down and learn to savor words and meaning with sensitivity and nuance. Our Web site employs digital technology to send students a message rarely found online: Slow is better.

Teaching the skills of contextualization is a major part of this process. Without an appreciation of context, history becomes flat and lifeless, a two-dimensional image that dwells in the shadows of an ever-more vibrant present. We owe it to our students to teach them to see history for what it is—an opportunity for question and debate that engages the mind to its fullest.

REFERENCES

APPENDIX A

EXCERPT FROM HISTORICAL THINKING MATTERS WEB SITE: MRS. ROBINSON’S LETTER

Head Note: In this letter, Jo Ann Robinson writes the Mayor of Montgomery asking for fair treatment on the buses.

Honorable Mayor W. Gayle
City Hall

Dear Sir:

The Women’s Political Council is very grateful to you and the City Commissioners for the hearing you allowed our representative during the month of March, 1954, when the “city-bus-fare-increase case” was being reviewed. There were several things the Council asked for:
1. A city law that would make it possible for Negroes to sit from back toward front, and whites from front toward back until all the seats are taken.
2. That Negroes not be asked or forced to pay fare at front and go to the rear of the bus to enter.
3. That busses stop at every corner in residential sections occupied by Negroes as they do in communities where whites reside.

We are happy to report that busses have begun stopping at more corners now in some sections where Negroes live than previously. However, the same practices in seating and boarding the bus continue.

Mayor Gayle, three-fourths of the riders of these public conveyances are Negroes. If Negroes did not patronize them, they could not possibly operate.

More and more of our people are already arranging with neighbors and friends to ride to keep from being insulted and humiliated by bus drivers.

There has been talk from twenty-five or more local organization[s] of planning a city-wide boycott of busses. We, sir, do not feel that forceful measures are necessary in bargaining for a convenience which is right for all bus passengers. . . .

Please consider this plea, and if possible, act favorably upon it, for even now plans are being made to ride less, or not at all, on our busses. We do not want this.

Respectfully yours,
The Women’s Political Council
Jo Ann Robinson, President


APPENDIX B

EXCERPT FROM HISTORICAL THINKING MATTERS WEB SITE: GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR READING MRS. ROBINSON’S LETTER

Sourcing: Consider a document’s attribution (both its author and how the document came into being).

How long before Rosa Parks’ arrest was this letter written?

Sourcing: Consider a document’s attribution (both its author and how the document came into being).

Why do you think Robinson reminds the mayor that three-fourths of the bus riders in Montgomery are African American?

Contextualizing: Situate the document and events it reports in place and time.

Given this document, agree or disagree with the following phrase, “Rosa Parks caused the Montgomery Bus Boycott.” Explain your position.

APPENDIX C

EXCERPT FROM HISTORICAL THINKING MATTERS WEB SITE: KING’S SPEECH

Head Note: At this Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) weekly meeting, King speaks to the crowd:

Democracy gives us this right to protest and that is all we’re doing. . . . We can say honestly that we have not advocated violence, have not practiced it and have gone courageously on with a Christian movement. Ours is a spiritual movement depending on moral and spiritual fortitude. The protest is still going on. (Great deal of applause here). . . .

Freedom doesn’t come on a silver platter. With every great movement toward freedom there will inevitably be trials. Somebody will have to have the courage to sacrifice. You don’t get to the Promised Land without going through the Wilderness. You don’t get there without crossing over hills and mountains, but if you keep on keeping on, you can’t help but reach it. We won’t all see it, but it’s coming and it’s because God is for it. . . . We won’t back down. We are going on with our movement.

Source: Excerpts from a speech by Martin Luther King, Jr., as reported by Anna Holden, a teacher at Fisk University, March 22, 1956, Montgomery, Alabama.