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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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### POINT OF VIEW

## Teaching the Mind Good Habits

By SAM WINEBURG

Smoking is a habit. Even the most hardened smoker had to take a first drag, sucking into the lungs a noxious cloud that scorched the unsuspecting alveoli and produced an uncontrollable cough. For many people, what began as a bizarre and exotic behavior becomes second nature, and they light cigarettes on rising in the morning, pouring a cup of coffee, relaxing at lunch, or unwinding after work.

Habits of mind aren't exactly the same, of course, but there are similarities. At some point in our lives, each part of the intellectual process demanded our full concentration. But once learned (or, more precisely, once mastered), our mental habits became so automatic that they faded from view.

It is that very point that spells trouble in the classroom. For the same aspects of cognition that ease our job as thinkers pose the greatest threat to our effectiveness as teachers. Our familiar mental habits, often overlooked or omitted when we describe our thinking processes to others, can create a gulf between us and our students.

For more than a decade, I have studied intellectual habits by asking scholars to read documents in my presence and to describe their thoughts as they do so. I have focused on historical texts because the ability to reconstruct the past from fragmented documents requires an expertise that intrigues me, as a cognitive psychologist. I search for clues that reveal how scholars see patterns among apparent contradictions that daunt less-skilled readers.

A typical research session goes something like this: I tell an Americanist that he will be reading documents on Abraham Lincoln and ask him about Lincoln's views on race. He cites classic monographs like Winthrop D. Jordan's *White Over Black* and George M. Fredrickson's *Black Image in the White Mind*, articles by Don E. Fehrenbacher and Lerone Bennett, and newer works like Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* and Eric Foner's *Story of American Freedom*. Even historians with specialties distant from the topic -- Africanists who study the Portuguese rule in Mozambique, or medievalists who write about the Albigenian heresy -- have no trouble delivering mini-lectures, bringing to bear the expertise they do possess and drawing analogies to Lincoln and the American Civil War.

Despite the range of documents, periods, and topics represented in my research, nearly all the historians I've studied have approached the primary sources that I give them in the same way. They glance momentarily at the first few words at the top of the page, but then their eyes dart to the bottom, zooming in on the document's provenance: its author, the date and location of its creation, the time and distance separating it from the event it reports, and, if possible, how the document came into their hands. Then the historians mull

over that information like a prospector examining a promising rock for ore. Is the document an un-self-conscious diary entry, or a text written to be read by others? Is the author someone noteworthy, or an ordinary person? Did the author write when the events were fresh in his or her mind, or so many years later that memories may no longer be reliable? The answers to questions like those create a framework upon which the historian's subsequent reading rests.

Few historians have found the pattern of looking first at the attribution worthy of comment when they describe to me how they approach a document. In fact, when I asked one prominent scholar of American industrialization about his initial focus on the document's provenance, he said, "Why would I mention that? Everyone does it."

For as long as I have been interviewing historians, I've also been presenting the same documents to high-school and college students. The students' readings follow a different path from the scholars', beginning with the first word at the top of the page and ending with the last word at the bottom. Rarely do students consider the attribution until they get to it; if they do look at it earlier, their goal is often utilitarian -- for example, to clear up a fuzzy pronoun reference. Primary documents differ little from textbooks to students, except that documents are harder to understand. For students, the purpose of both kinds of text is the same: to convey information that they can repeat on tests.

During the same semester that I interviewed the specialist on industrialization, I sat down with a dozen of his students from a large undergraduate course. It turned out that none of the undergraduates had yet acquired the habit of mind that he found unremarkable. Fresh from high school, where they had been fed a diet of textbook gruel, the undergraduates continued to read in ways that had served them well.

When I've broached the topic of habits of mind with historians, I've often encountered an uncharacteristic reticence. Those who comment often refer to general critical-thinking skills that could apply just as easily to texts about astrophysics or wire-haired terriers as to historical documents. Yet across the many historians I've interviewed, from the most traditional diplomatic historian to the hippest adherent of the trendiest subfield, I've been able to discern the contours of a shared disciplinary culture.

Not all intelligent people read the same way -- not even all people who spend their working lives with written texts. I was able to demonstrate that point clearly in a workshop I conducted for an interdisciplinary group of scholars assembled by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Four of the roughly 20 participants were historians; the others were mathematicians, biologists, psychologists, engineers, or literary scholars. It was from the last group that I recruited a volunteer to read aloud a primary source in a public demonstration of my research technique.

The document came from one of my earliest studies, in which I had asked historians to reconstruct the events at Lexington on the eve of the Revolutionary War. I presented my volunteer, a specialist in 19th-century British literature, with a diary entry from John Barker, a lieutenant in the British army. In the entry, Barker said he was writing on the same day as the bloody encounter at Lexington and the even bloodier retreat from Concord. Barker blamed his own men for

"rushing in and putting to flight" the minutemen gathered in Lexington, and he explicitly denied giving the order to fire.

My volunteer gave a dramatic reading, commenting on archaic figures of speech, the density of the prose (the first sentence has more than 150 words), and linguistic mannerisms indicative of social class. As she read, she made many astute comments about the language but seemed at times confused about the narrator's identity. On reaching the attribution at the end, she said, "Ah, yes. From a British soldier. That's what I thought."

The listening historians confessed to me privately afterward that the reading had shocked them. It had cast doubt on their core assumptions about the reading process, for checking the source before reading the text, which was second nature to them, never occurred to our intelligent and careful reader. Indeed, the trajectory of the literature professor's reading -- the subjects it touched on, as well as those it never addressed -- demonstrated to the historians the complicated truth that there is no such thing as generic critical thinking. We think critically within the bounds of our disciplines, and features of thought considered critical in one field often fail to appear in another.

For students, historical habits of mind constitute major intellectual hurdles. Students see their professors' thoughts as finished products, tidied up and packaged for public presentation in books, articles, and lectures. Historians shield from view their raw thinking, the way they try to make sense of their subject.

We need to bring this messier form of expertise into the classroom. Students who believe that knowledge bursts Athena-like from the professor's head may never learn to think like historians, may never be able to reconstruct past worlds from the most minimal of clues. We need to show students that the self-assured figure lecturing from the podium is not what a historian looks like in his or her office, puzzling through difficult texts.

In fact, the processes by which a scholar makes sense of material -- what I sometimes call the intermediate processes of cognition -- are powerful teaching tools. Historians can model in class how they read by having students bring in unfamiliar texts and demonstrating how to interpret and assess them. With a companion document, they can show the strategies they use to corroborate evidence and piece together a coherent context. Or professors could refer students to the useful Web site [History Matters](http://www.historymatters.gmu.edu) (<http://www.historymatters.gmu.edu>), whose section on making sense of evidence includes acclaimed historians' discussions of how they evaluate different genres of primary evidence.

By sharing their mental habits, historians could teach students skills they would find useful every time they faced a take-home exam or research paper: how to get started when they lack necessary information, how to prepare their minds to deal with new topics, how to develop a hunch. The benefits would extend far beyond the intellectual. Students would come to see professors as kindred spirits, as people who formulate and struggle with questions rather than merely assigning them on tests.

Professors may assume that their students are stupid or suffer

from a learning disability. Often the truth is much simpler: No one has ever bothered to teach them some basic but powerful skills of interpretation. As teachers, we need to remember what the world looked like before we learned our discipline's ways of seeing it. We need to show our students the patient and painstaking processes by which we achieved expertise. Only by making our footsteps visible can we expect students to follow in them.

*Sam Wineburg is a professor of education at Stanford University. His most recent book is Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past (Temple University Press, 2001).*

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