

“Text Complexity” in the History Classroom: *Teaching to and Beyond the Common Core*

by Avishag Reisman, Ph.D. & Sam Wineburg, Ph.D.



Dr. Reisman is a Senior Researcher at UCLA’s National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, & Student Testing (CRESST). She was the Project Director for “Reading Like a Historian” in San Francisco. Her work has appeared in *Cognition and Instruction* (2012a) and the *Journal of Curriculum Studies* (2012b). Her dissertation, which emerged from this project, won the 2011 Larry Metcalf Award from the National Council of the Social Studies.



Dr. Wineburg is the Margaret Jacks Chair of Education and Professor of History, by courtesy, at Stanford University, and the Director of the Stanford History Education Group.

Reading Standard 10 of the recently released *Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* focuses on “text complexity,” bringing new attention to the sophistication and variety of the texts students encounter in school. Who can argue with that? A steady stream of studies on adolescent reading comprehension has called for secondary reading to move beyond the meager diet of narrative fiction and textbook prose (cf. Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010; National Institute for Literacy, 2007). In fact, a 2006 American College Testing (ACT) study revealed that the biggest predictor of college enrollment and success was not the type of *question* students answered but the type of *text* students read. Text complexity, rather than students’ ability to answer questions about an author’s main idea or purpose, seems to be the best predictor of college readiness (ACT, 2006). The bottom line is that students who can face the challenge of complex texts are more likely get into college and succeed.

This new emphasis on text complexity has sent English Language Arts (ELA) teachers across the country scrambling to find “informational

texts.” Social studies teachers, on the other hand, are blessed with easy access to complex primary sources – the Library of Congress’s *American Memory* alone has digitized hundreds of thousands of documents. But access does not guarantee success. The documentary record may provide a treasury of letters, diaries, secret communiqués, official promulgations, public speeches and the like, but merely presenting students with complex texts does not work magic. On the contrary, far from providing a silver bullet that will eradicate the nation’s literacy crisis, the mere selection of complex texts represents only the first step in effective document-based instruction. If struggling readers are to benefit from complex texts we need to take three additional steps. We must: a) pose a central question; b) modify the document; and c) offer multiple opportunities for practice.

We ground our suggestions in a key understanding about history instruction sometimes skipped by literacy coaches: in order for students to engage with texts in sophisticated ways, they must see these texts as *evidence*. That is, students who are asked to simply pull historical facts from a primary source are no better prepared

for the literacy demands of college than those who cull facts from a textbook. It is in learning to interrogate the reliability and truth claims of a particular source that students begin to engage in the sorts of activities that lie at the heart of historical thinking (Reisman & Wineburg, 2008; Wineburg 2001; Wineburg, Martin, & Montecano, 2011).

Our intervention work in San Francisco schools provides the empirical basis for our suggestions (Reisman, 2012a; 2012b). We compared 11th grade students who were taught with a document-based U.S. history curriculum to students in traditional classrooms. Students who received document-based instruction outperformed their counterparts on measures of reading comprehension, historical thinking, and general reasoning. At the core of the intervention lay the ‘Document-Based Lesson,’ a new lesson structure that presented students with a predictable sequence of activities that over time built up the ability to cope with complex primary sources (Reisman, 2012b). Here we discuss how we prepared the documents for the ‘Document-Based Lesson,’ and we make the case for such instruction using the Common Core’s framework for “Text Complexity.”

Text Complexity: A Dilemma

At first glance, the concept of text complexity seems straightforward enough: complex texts presumably have longer, more sophisticated sentences and challenging vocabulary. By this definition, President Polk’s 1846 message to Congress, a 3,000-word speech requesting a declaration of war against Mexico, certainly qualifies as a complex text. A closer look at the Common Core definition, however, reveals that “text complexity” transcends the sum of its quantitative parts (i.e., words per sentence; word frequency) (see CCSS, 2010, Appendix A, p. 4-5). Qualitative aspects of the text come into play (e.g., levels of meaning, language conventionality, and knowledge demands), as well as factors that relate to

the specific readers (e.g., their motivation, experience, etc.) and the purpose and complexity of the questions or task assigned with the reading. In other words, the interaction between the reader and the text plays a critical role in defining text complexity.

A thorny instructional dilemma emerges from this definition: on the one hand, students should engage with complex texts that broaden their linguistic repertoire; on the other hand, they should engage with texts in ways that are rigorous and intellectually meaningful. If they devote all their mental resources to assembling a basic understanding of the propositions in the text (what van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983, call a “*textbase model*”), they have few resources remaining to interpret or analyze what the author is actually saying and how it relates to what they already know (what the same researchers call a “*situation model*”). Moreover, for many students, no amount of effort could help them decipher Polk’s message in Figure 1. To engage with Polk’s message, students would have to appreciate the context for the speech – namely, the seething tensions between the U.S. and Mexico in the wake of Texas annexation. The document’s complexity lies in how Polk blames Mexico for the outbreak of hostilities, despite clear indications *in the speech itself* of American aggression. The instructional challenge, then, is to simplify the document sufficiently to allow students to engage with the true nature of its complexity: a broader historical context without which the document’s meaning remains opaque. We argue that key instructional moves can resolve this dilemma and transform complex texts into curriculum that can be used with struggling readers.

Pose a Central Question

The first step in designing history instruction around complex texts is to give students an intellectually stimulating purpose for reading. A central historical question focuses students’ attention and transforms the act of reading into

a process of active inquiry. Historical questions share two key characteristics: 1) they are open to multiple interpretations; 2) they direct students to the historical record, rather than to their philosophical or moral beliefs. For example, a good historical question asks, “*Why* did the U.S. drop the atomic bomb?” rather than “*Should* the U.S. have dropped the atomic bomb?” and forces students to support their claims with textual evidence. “Should” questions, while important, too often lead students astray, and the resulting discussion leaves the text far behind.

“Historical questions can be further divided into *evaluative* questions, which ask students to pass judgment on historical actors and events (e.g., Was the New Deal a success? Was Lincoln a racist?), or *interpretive* questions, which are more open-ended (e.g., Who benefitted from the New Deal? Why did Lincoln pass the Emancipation Proclamation?)” (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2009). The most important consideration when designing a central question is whether it can be answered with evidence from the document, or whether it diverts students’ gaze from the textual evidence at hand.

Any number of historical questions could be asked of President Polk’s message to Congress, depending on the teacher’s goals. One question immediately comes to mind: Who started the war? Polk argues the Mexicans fired first, yet his narrative suggests another story. A clear historical question allows the teacher to excerpt those parts of the document that directly address the question (see Figure 1).

Modify the Document

Polk’s excerpted speech in Figure 1 would still present a formidable challenge to many struggling readers. To make the documents visually and cognitively accessible to students below grade level, we suggest the radical step of physically tampering with them – a decision that many

archivists would consider unthinkable, but one that we consider essential. In our work with struggling readers and English Language Learners we prepare documents by simplifying vocabulary, conventionalizing spelling and punctuation, and reordering sentences into straightforward sentence-verb constructions (see, for example, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWz08mVUIt8>). In all our adaptations, we urge teachers to preserve the document’s original language and tone. The extent of the modifications should abate over the course of the year. When students become more comfortable reading primary sources, we increase text complexity by removing these scaffolds.

Finally, we recommend presenting documents in ways that would invite, rather than intimidate, struggling readers. In a 72 lesson curriculum designed for the 11th grade U.S. history classroom (<http://sheg.stanford.edu>), we provided documents that are no longer than 250 words, written in large font and surrounded by comforting white space. These adaptations are the only way struggling readers can be exposed to *some* of the flavor, cadence, feel, and ethos of Polk’s, or Augustine’s, or Jefferson’s, or Frederick Douglass’s words (see Figure 2).

We recognize that such a suggestion will make purists’ blood boil. “An outrage that dumbs down and cheapens the past. Inserting contemporary language into documents while retaining the designation ‘primary source’ is dishonest! If history is about getting at truth, how can you justify lying to do so?” In our work with teachers, we’ve encountered similar objections and our answer is always the same: Don’t lie. When students first encounter a primary source, always have them compare the original to the adaptation to demonstrate that the sources they’ll be using have been specifically prepared for the classroom. Students can generate questions about the original after working with the adapted forms, or directly compare one or two sentences, considering if and how the editing affected their understanding.

James K. Polk, President of the United States at Washington, D.C., to the Congress of the United States, in a special message calling for a declaration of war against Mexico.

Washington, May 11, 1846.

To the Senate and the House of Representatives:

The strong desire to establish peace with Mexico on liberal and honorable terms, and the readiness of this Government to regulate and adjust our boundary and other causes of difference with that power on such fair and equitable principles as would lead to permanent relations of the most friendly nature, induced me in September last to seek the reopening of diplomatic relations between the two countries. . . . An envoy of the United States repaired to Mexico with full powers to adjust every existing difference. . . . The Mexican Government not only refused to receive him or listen to his propositions, but after a long-continued series of menaces have at last invaded our territory and shed the blood of our fellow-citizens on our own soil. . .

In my message at the commencement of the present session I informed you that upon the earnest appeal both of the Congress and convention of Texas I had ordered an efficient military force to take a position “between the Nueces and Del Norte.” This had become necessary to meet a threatened invasion of Texas by the Mexican forces, for which extensive military preparations had been made. The invasion was threatened solely because Texas had determined, in accordance with a solemn resolution of the Congress of the United States, to annex herself to our Union, and under these circumstances it was plainly our duty to extend our protection over her citizens and soil.

This force was concentrated at Corpus Christi, and remained there until after I had received such information from Mexico as rendered it probable, if not certain, that the Mexican Government would refuse to receive our envoy.

Meantime Texas, by the final act of our Congress, had become an integral part of our Union. The Congress of Texas, by its act of December 19, 1836, had declared the Rio del Norte to be the boundary of that Republic. Its jurisdiction had been extended and exercised beyond the Nueces. The country between that river and the Del Norte had been represented in the Congress and in the convention of Texas. . .

The movement of the troops to the Del Norte was made by the commanding general under positive instructions to abstain from all aggressive acts toward Mexico or Mexican citizens and to regard the relations between that Republic and the United States as peaceful unless she should declare war or commit acts of hostility indicative of a state of war.

The Mexican forces at Matamoras assumed a belligerent attitude. . . . But no open act of hostility was committed until the 24th of April. On that day General Arista, who had succeeded to the command of the Mexican forces, communicated to General Taylor that “he considered hostilities commenced and should prosecute them.” A party of dragoons of 63 men and officers were on the same day dispatched from the American camp up the Rio del Norte, on its left bank, to ascertain whether the Mexican troops had crossed or were preparing to cross the river, “became engaged with a large body of these troops, and after a short affair, in which some 16 were killed and wounded, appear to have been surrounded and compelled to surrender.

We have tried every effort at reconciliation. The cup of forbearance had been exhausted even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte. But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war.

JAMES K. POLK

Figure 1. Excerpted Document: President Polk’s message to Congress

James K. Polk, President of the United States at Washington, D.C., to the Congress of the United States in a special message calling for a declaration of war against Mexico.

Washington, May 11, 1846

To the Senate and the House of Representatives:

The strong desire to establish peace with Mexico led me last September to reopen diplomatic relations between the two countries. An envoy of the United States went to Mexico with full powers to negotiate. The Mexican Government refused to receive him or listen to his propositions.

Upon the request both of the Congress and convention of Texas I had ordered a military force to take a position "between the Nueces River and Rio Grande." This had become necessary to meet a threatened invasion of Texas by the Mexican forces. The invasion was threatened solely because Texas had determined to annex herself to our Union, and under these circumstances it was plainly our duty to extend our protection over her citizens and soil.

Meantime Texas, by the final act of our Congress, had become an integral part of our Union. The Congress of Texas, by its act of December 19, 1836, had declared the Rio Grande to be the boundary of that Republic. Its jurisdiction had been extended beyond the Nueces River. . . .

The movement of American troops to the Rio Grande was made under positive instructions to refrain from all aggressive acts and to regard the relations between Mexico and the United States as peaceful unless she should declare war or commit acts of hostility.

On April 24, the commander of the Mexican forces communicated to General Taylor that "he considered hostilities commenced and should prosecute them." A party of 63 men and officers were dispatched from the American camp up the Rio Grande to determine whether the Mexican troops had crossed or were preparing to cross the Rio Grande. These American troops "became engaged with a large body of Mexican troops, and after a short battle, in which some 16 were killed and wounded, appear to have been surrounded and compelled to surrender."

We have tried every effort at reconciliation. But now, after repeated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil.

JAMES K. POLK

Figure 2. Modified Document: President Polk's message to Congress

Opportunities for Practice

Our third suggestion – providing students with multiple opportunities for practice – is the most obvious and, simultaneously, the most challenging to fulfill. In our San Francisco study, students in classes with document-based instruction outgrew their counterparts in reading comprehension in part because they read *every day*. Reading a single 250-word document will not make a student a stronger reader, but reading and interpreting 3-5 documents per week over the course of a school year will. When students read often, their fluency and vocabulary grow, allowing them to engage with increasingly challenging texts.

Conclusion

The recent discovery that students struggle to comprehend complex texts did not surprise those of us who have long worked with struggling readers. However, increasing the complexity of classroom texts without thinking deeply about the accompanying pedagogy is a surefire recipe for failure. Like any process of skill development, reading comprehension is gradual. Our three suggestions – pose a central question, modify the document, and provide multiple opportunities for practice – allow students to develop the requisite skills to tackle the increasingly complex texts that they will encounter in their journey to college.

References

ACT, Inc. (2006). *Reading between the lines: What the ACT reveals about college readiness in reading*. Iowa City, IA: Author.

Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy. (2010). *Time to act: An agenda for advancing adolescent literacy for college and career success*. New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. (2010). National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers.

Haroutunian-Gordon, S. *Learning to Teach Through Discussion: The Art of Turning the Soul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

National Institute for Literacy. (2007). *What content-area teachers should know about adolescent literacy*. Washington, D.C.

Reisman, A. (2012). Reading like a historian: A document-based history intervention in an urban high school. *Cognition and Instruction*, 30(1), 86-112.

Reisman, A. (2012b). The “Document-Based Lesson”: Bringing disciplinary inquiry into high school history classrooms with struggling adolescent readers. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 44(2), 233-264.

Reisman, A., & Wineburg, S. (2008). *Teaching the skill of contextualizing in history*. *Social Studies*, 99(5), 202-207.

Wineburg, S. (2001). *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts: Charting the future of teaching the past*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple.

van Dijk, T. A., & Kintsch, W. (1983). *Strategies of discourse comprehension*. New York: Academic Press.

Wineburg, S., Martin, D., & Monte-Sano, C. (2011). *Reading like a historian: Teaching literacy in the middle and high school classroom*. New York: Teachers College.