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In most disciplines, professors ask students to "read" without specifying what this operation means for their particular field. This chapter traces the path laid out in a cultural history class, where reading entails identifying the essential elements of a text.

Decoding the Reading of History: An Example of the Process

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There are few areas in which the differences in learning across academic disciplines are more visible than in that of reading. The instruction "read" has such a radically different meaning in the context of courses in physics, accounting, English, or history that we probably do students a disservice by even using the same word. This is a particularly difficult problem in history, where students often face hundreds of pages of reading and where several different forms of reading may be required in the same course. If college history teachers do not make some effort to teach the forms of reading necessary for their classes, it is likely that many students will be stopped at the beginning of the learning process.

Step 1. What Is the Bottleneck to Learning in This Class?

I began to grapple with this problem in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Pace, 1993) as my encounters with the scholarship in the field made me increasingly aware of the disciplinary nature of learning (see, for example, Brown, Collins, and Duguid, 1989; Tobias, 1992–1993). But I was only able to fully confront this challenge in the mid-1990s, when I set out to create from scratch a one hundred-student course on the history of ideas about the future for my university's freshman topics program.

My goal was to create a level playing field in which students who had weak backgrounds in historical thinking would have the same chance to master the material in the course as those who had been "preeducated." My previous experience as a teacher strongly suggested that I should focus a

great deal of attention on the problems students face with reading. The most obvious problem was that of selectivity. Students lacked criteria for deciding what was most essential in a text and what could be passed over. Storytelling is essential to historical writing, but students tended to give the details the same attention as the broad outline of the story. For years I had heard students complain that they had difficulty remembering everything they had read. I had told them to concentrate on what was important, but I now recognize that this process of identifying the most important aspects of a text was a more complex task than I had realized and that I needed to show my students just how I went about this process.

Thus, my students' difficulty in distinguishing between the essential and the nonessential elements in a text was a clear bottleneck to learning in my course. This posed a problem for a large percentage of my students, and students found it difficult to master the basic elements of the course without having mastered this bottleneck. Therefore, I decided that this should be one of the central features around which I would shape the early weeks of the course.

Step 2. How Does an Expert Do These Things?

Before I could help students learn the specific forms of reading required in history courses, I had to reconstruct what professional historians do when they read secondary sources. This is a more difficult step than might be imagined because the process is so automatic to a trained historian that it is apt to be invisible. In retrospect, I can see that the process would have been greatly aided if I had then had access to the literature on reading in history at both the secondary and college levels that was just beginning to appear, in particular the research of Wineburg, who has marvelously demonstrated the intertextuality that lies at the core of so much of historical reading (Wineburg, 2001; Perfetti and others, 1994; Shemilt, 2000; Britt and others, 1994; McKeown and Beck, 1994). Lacking access to this literature at the time, I first tried introspection to get an idea of the steps that I, as a professional historian, take automatically when presented with a secondary source like those that my students struggle with. I also asked faculty members from history departments of my own and other universities just what they wanted students to do when they asked them to read particular passages.

From this, there emerged a series of steps by which expert historians organize a text as they read, separating what is essential from what is not:

They bring to the text a series of questions that need to be answered and add other questions as they arise from the process of reading.

They identify the central thesis and the subsidiary arguments that explain or qualify it.

They distinguish between these arguments and the evidence used to support them.

They commit to memory the central and the subsidiary arguments.
They retain selected bits of evidence to help them understand the nature of
   the argument and ignore the rest.

This filtering process seems self-evident to professional historians, but it is different from that used in other disciplines, and it is foreign to many of those who take my courses. To students who read all the statements in a secondary source as existing on the same level, none of this architecture exists. They process the statement of the central thesis of a study in precisely the same manner as the least important piece of evidence, and the task of memorization is enormous. Even if they are capable of such prodigious acts of memory, they find that the mass of details is of little use in completing the basic tasks of the course.

Step 3. How Can These Tasks Be Explicitly Modeled?

Because the ability to discriminate between essential and nonessential elements of a historical narrative is crucial to success in my course, I have devoted a significant amount of energy to helping my students master this ability during the first week. On the first day of class, I tell the students that part of their job in college is to learn the specific forms of thinking that are needed in each field in which they take courses. Then I describe history as a storytelling discipline in which it is necessary to understand the point of the story, not to memorize all of the details. I let them know that they will need to be able to separate the broader story (or thesis) from the details that support it; remember the story (or thesis) using the examples to confirm that they understand the point; and forget most of the details, retaining only a few well-chosen examples to help them remember the story and to allow them to support the position if they need to. I show a passage from the assigned readings in a PowerPoint slide and then show the same passage again, but this time I have changed the font size of different phrases to indicate that for the purposes of our course, their importance determines their size (see Figure 2.1).

After a discussion of why I made these particular choices, I pledge that at no point in the course will they be asked a question that quizzes them on details such as name five prophets in the *Old Testament*. A similar exercise, involving collaborative learning teams, reinforces this learning in the second class period.

Because redundancy is an essential element in learning complex tasks, I placed a parallel description of this process on the course Web site. But I have also used the interactive potential of the Internet to model historical reading in a more dynamic manner. On a second Web page, a student can click on icons scattered across a passage from the week's readings and hear a recording of what was going through my mind as I read that part of the text. To give the listener a relatively unmediated experience of my reading

process, I intentionally recorded these comments without preparation or rehearsal and did not edit the hesitations and word choices. As I spoke, I was actually modeling several different aspects of historical reading, such as linking parts of this text to other texts or themes from the course. But the recording focused particularly on the process of establishing a hierarchy of importance in the text. To emphasize this point, I even indicated that, in the middle of an ancient Akkadian poem that had nothing to do with the issues in my course, I was going to skip to the end of that section without reading it all. (This and samples of other materials described in this chapter can be viewed at http://www.indiana.edu/~flp.)

Step 4. How Will Students Practice These Skills and Get Feedback?

Modeling the kinds of mental operations that are necessary for work in a discipline can be a crucial element in a systematic strategy for overcoming obstacles to student learning. But it is unlikely that these patterns of thinking will

Figure 2.1. Modeling Reading History Selectively

First overhead: A passage from the reading

"The Jewish apocalyptic genre emerged from the earlier prophetic tradition, but is distinct from it. The Jewish prophets of the eighth to the sixth centuries B.C.—Amos, Joel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the others—functioned primarily as preachers, focusing on the people's transgressions and foretelling the Lord's renewed favor if they repented and further woes if they did not. The prophets were present minded and specific as they addressed a people beset by enemies and continually straying from the path of righteousness."

Second overhead: The same paragraph with the importance of difference sections emphasized:

"The Jewish apocalyptic genre emerged from the earlier prophetic tradition, but is distinct from it. The Jewish prophets of the eighth to the sixth centuries B.C.—Amos, Joel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the others—functioned primarily as preachers, focusing on the people's transgressions and foretelling the Lord's renewed favor if they repented and further woes if they did not. The prophets were present minded and specific as they addressed a people beset by enemies and continually straying from the path of righteousness."

become part of students' cognitive repertoire unless they have opportunities to practice them and receive feedback. My course on the History of the Future provided this opportunity in two forms: in-class team exercises and online weekly assignments.

In the second class period, I reinforced the modeling of the previous meeting when I again gave the class another passage, but this time I asked them to decide in teams what parts are most and least important to remember and to articulate the principles that led to these judgments. The shared nature of this work not only forced students to make explicit the criteria that they use to establish a hierarchy of importance but also allowed me to provide them with extra feedback on how well they understood the process.

Ultimately, however, the students must learn to operate in the world of history on their own, and they need individual as well as group practice and feedback. Therefore, I have added to the course Web site weekly assignments modeled after Novak's *Just-in-Time Teaching* (Novak, Patterson, Gavrin, and Christian, 2004) that are targeted at specific operations that the students must master to succeed in the course. For example, in the first weekly Web assignment, students are given an additional passage from the readings and asked once again to specify one item from the text that they think they should not remember for the purposes of this course, to provide one item that they should remember, and to briefly explain both choices. In subsequent Web assignments, they are regularly asked to specify the central idea of a particular reading assignment, thus giving them more practice at distinguishing between essential statements of a thesis and supporting evidence.

These team and Web assignments serve to reinforce the basic patterns of historical reading that I have modeled in class, and they give the students feedback on their progress in this area. Thus, if students are at all engaged in the course, they should know well before the first exam whether their reading strategies are appropriate for this kind of course. At the same time, this work gives students an occasion to engage in some informal metacognitive explorations of how they used their minds in this and in other courses.

Step 5. What Will Motivate the Students?

This step of motivating students is absolutely crucial, and it needs to be considered carefully before the process of modeling, practice, and feedback begins. Students must be drawn willingly into this process of learning about learning, and it would be a serious error to assume that if we build a perfect pedagogical playing field, the students will automatically come along. They may need a special invitation.

Relatively few undergraduates conceive of their courses in terms of mastering different disciplinary ways of thinking, and they have to be shown that it is in their interest to spend time on this, rather than moving

directly to "what will be on the test." I couch the presentation of the Decoding the Disciplines process (see Chapter One) in terms of students getting the maximum return on the time that they invest in a course. I point out that many surveys suggest that the difference between students who do well and those who do not is often more the result of how they study than of how much they study. I make it clear that a real commitment of time and energy is necessary for success, but that if they are not working in a manner that is appropriate to the discipline they are studying, more work is not apt to yield a higher grade.

The structure of the Decoding the Disciplines model itself can also make a positive contribution to motivation. It moves the focus from large, potentially overwhelming challenges, such as writing an essay exam, to more discrete and manageable tasks, such as deciding what is essential to remember in a passage of assigned reading. Students receive meaningful feedback each week on well-defined actions, rather than global feedback a few times during the course. Their sense of mastery can increase as they move to ever more complex tasks, and the learning environment is transformed from a few giant leaps to a series of manageable steps.

In addition, I present myself consistently as someone who wishes them to succeed and who has gone to considerable lengths to make it possible for them to master this material, regardless of their level of previous preparation. I mention my own difficulties as a first-generation college student moving from a substandard high school to a demanding college, and I stress that I have tried to create a course in which any student who has met the admissions requirements of my university should be able to succeed if she or he is willing to put in the work. But at the same time I make it clear that I have high expectations for them, that whereas the individual steps may be smaller, I expect them to make a real commitment to the process and to climb as high as or higher than students in other history classes.

Finally, I have placed this process of mastering historical thinking within an aesthetically pleasing and intellectually exciting context. The in-class work on these operations is accompanied by PowerPoint presentations that give visual learners an experience of the history of the future through images ranging from medieval frescos of the Apocalypse to science fiction covers from the 1920s. The weekly assignments are therefore part of a rich course Web site that gives students an experience of texts and images that reinforces this learning.

Step 6. How Well Are Students Mastering These Learning Tasks?

One of the great virtues of the Decoding the Disciplines model is that it makes assessment of student learning much simpler. When instructors attempt to measure global and often fuzzy concepts such as critical thinking, it is difficult to pinpoint which students have mastered the skills and

which have not. In a history course, for example, a bad performance on an essay exam may be the result of a failure to master the grand concepts of the course or of an inability to operate on the much more basic level, such as knowing how to read in a manner appropriate to the discipline. Or a student may have mastered nine of ten essential skills, but the absence of the last one makes invisible the success that has been achieved.

The process of defining disciplinary operations brings precision to the process of assessment, and in most cases the mechanisms that give students an opportunity for practice and feedback can themselves provide useful information about where student learning is and is not occurring. This allows us to decide where to devote more of the precious class time to skills mastery and where that is less necessary.

As I have indicated earlier, in my course on the History of the Future, the team and Web exercises simultaneously help model basic operations, give the students practice at these operations, and serve to provide feedback. The results have been encouraging. Whereas in the past, a large number of my students in introductory courses remained unable to read secondary sources in a manner that is appropriate in a history course, now virtually the entire class demonstrates by the end of the first week that they can successfully discriminate the relative importance of different parts of the passage.

This exercise in prioritizing is not the end of the process because a number of other aspects of historical reading need to be taught later in the semester, and the basic patterns covered in the first week will need to be reinforced from time to time. But I can move forward in the knowledge that the great majority of the class will not be swamped in a sea of historical facts, all seemingly of equal importance.

It is also important to remember that this process does not—and in most cases should not—exclude more traditional methods of assessment. Students in my course write take-home essays in response to questions that I provide, just as they have always done in my classes. This provides them with an occasion to combine specific operations they have been learning in more complex tasks in a manner that more directly parallels the kinds of challenges they will be facing in later life. But now I can feel confident that if a student does badly, it is because he or she has not made a real commitment to the process, not because of a preexisting deficit of educational opportunity that my course is only compounding.

But what of content? In the case of the History of the Future course, what about changing patterns of thought, such as belief in the Apocalypse and secular progress, trust in technology and fear of nuclear devastation, the exclusion and inclusion of various groups in visions of the future, and all the other questions that arise when a historian looks at this material? What place has all of this content in a course that begins with step-by-step exercises in how to read history? I can slightly limit the effects of the time transferred from content to skills by being certain that the passages used in

these exercises are particularly important to an understanding of the material because these are the sections of the readings that students are most apt to remember. But class time is limited, and the time spent on such exercises must be subtracted from time previously devoted directly to studying historical developments.

These are serious concerns, but ultimately these potential objections assume a kind of fetishistic relationship to teaching, as if the important event is what words pass through my mouth, not what new ideas enter my students' brains. In fact, the only thing that really matters is what happens in the minds of students. If my students do not understand the basic language of history, my presentations are as pointless as if they were delivered in ancient Akkadian. Absolutely nothing real has been lost if the content that has been sacrificed was not being understood in the first place.

In the past, I was faced with a chilling choice between teaching to the small portion of the class that had already been preeducated in the craft of history or of lowering the level of instruction to a flat recitation of facts. I now feel that I have tools that can give me the ability to open the discussion to students who would otherwise never have access to the great banquet of knowledge and insight that contemporary historiography can offer them. If I can expand the number of students who can be invited to this banquet by even a few percentage points each semester, it is a small price to pay for a diversion of a small portion of the time I share with them.

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