

# You Can't Have a Digital Revolution Without Critical Literacy.

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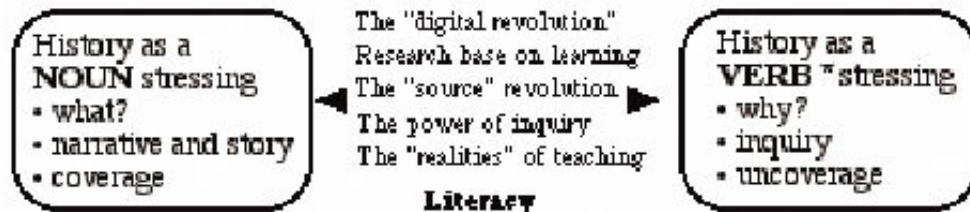
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## Abstract

In working with new teachers and teacher candidates in teacher education with the many demands placed upon them, it makes sense to combine a number of learning goals. The following article examines the idea that literacy, technology, and subject curriculum goals are a powerful combination. Indeed, critical literacy with a stress on inferring, is a necessary component of sound use of the internet for source-based history. This article presents two simple but powerful templates for analyzing sources followed by examples of a key literacy orientation for busy teachers to use both on line and face-to-face in classrooms from grades 7-12. It concludes with a research agenda in the form of some key questions for some of the unexamined issues in the integration of critical literacy and information technology in the history classroom.

## A Case for Critical Literacy

There has always been a tension between viewing history as a story (noun) and viewing it as an investigation (verb). This goes back to the Latin and Greek origins of the word itself and the approaches of Herodotus and Thucydides, each of whom stressed one part of this continuum. I call it a continuum because I view both as important. Yet it is fair to say that in schools, the former is stressed at the expense of the latter based on such factors as the dominance of textbook teaching, full frontal teaching dominated by the lecture, and testing stressing factual recall. At least this seems to be the case in U.S. schools (Goodlad, 1984; Hicks, Doolittle, and Lee, 2004; Friedman, 2006). In Canada we have had no large scale studies of school history in practice since Hodgetts (1968) though when the popular press reports on school history they usually comment on the lack of knowledge by students as revealed in tests rather than any inability to think historically (Morton, 2000; Gibson and von Heyking, 2003).



In the past four decades there have been a number of developments with the potential to change the "grammatical balance"<sup>1</sup> of the subject as taught in schools. The "digital revolution" appears to be the latest of these. Many have spoken of the potential for new technologies beyond the lecture and textbook to liberate teachers and students to do creative work across the curriculum, including the social studies (for example, Levesque, 2005; Allen, Dutt-Doner, Eini, Frederick, Chuang, and Thompson, 2005/6). Teacher education programs in particular are expected to infuse new technologies into their programs to meet the needs and experiences of the next generation of teachers (Darling-Hammond, Banks, Zumwalt, Gomez, Sherin, Griesdorn, and Finn (2005). Yet despite enthusiasm for on-line work, there are many factors that may limit its impact, especially the realities of a busy teacher's life.

This article focuses on literacy in the digital age for the following reasons.

- Literacy is a public issue in schools and is getting more attention in the form of funding, professional development, and both human and material resources. The case needs to be made that good social studies and history teaching equals literacy. The use of primary sources is part of this case and may help teachers attend to literacy, inquiry, and subject-based outcomes simultaneously.
- The literacy demands on students reading and writing history and social studies are considerable, even with visual information (Myers, 1990; Greene, 1994; Counsell, 1997; Werner, 2004).
- Students need to become critical readers in order to make sense of the past and the present, especially when working with new technologies (Wineburg and Martin, 2004; Roswell and Booth, 2005, Sandwell, 2005).

Unless teaching pedagogies change, the impact of new technologies will be limited (November, 2001; McKenzie, 2003; Wiske with Franz and Breit, 2005; Burns, 2005/6). How do we prepare teacher candidates who lack experience or experienced teachers who lack the time to become "digital revolutionaries"?

This article takes small steps. Teacher education programs cannot be expected to do it all. And in the case of history education, many of our candidates, even in provinces that have separated history from social studies, lack deep knowledge of both the content and the structure of the discipline. So part of a teacher educator's job is to build capacity among new teachers to learn. This includes "catching-up" on skills and understandings seen as lacking by history specialists and professional historians.

When I speak of "digital revolution" I am referring to web-based and paper copy of primary sources only. Space prevents any substantive examination of the ever-widening use of other technologies such as video recorders, graphing calculators, computers and software, internet games and simulations, webquests, and a whole host of multimedia devices such as ipods.

"Critical literacy" is defined by the International Reading Association as active, engaged

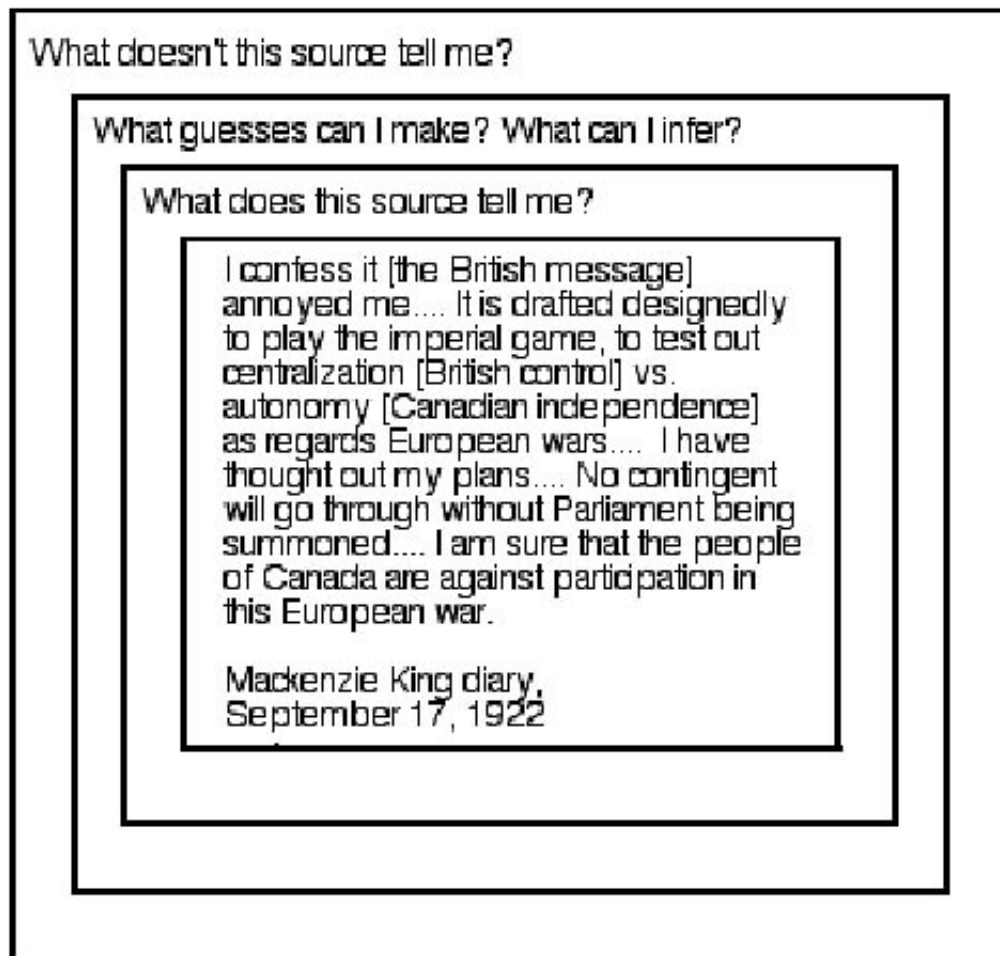
reading in which students approach texts with a critical eye-thinking about what the text says about the world, why it says it, and whether the claims made by the text should be accepted. [http://www.reading.org/resources/issues/focus\\_critical.html](http://www.reading.org/resources/issues/focus_critical.html).

The next section offers two specific techniques for critical document analysis.

### Analyzing a single document

While there are many approaches to analyzing documents, the British, originators of the "source revolution" of more than three decades ago, have made such analysis simple yet powerful by focusing on what is really important: content, context and the place of inference. Here is an example of a template for use with single documents: text, visual, or both (adapted from Riley, 1999).

What other questions do I need to ask?



The graphic is a visual representation of the process of working within the document to working around the document. Students write notes related to the question in the relevant blank rectangles.

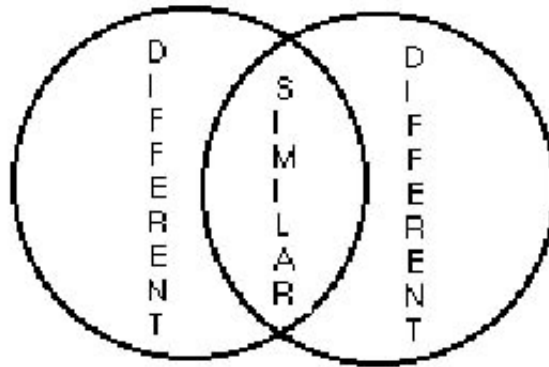
This technique stresses critical reading in which the reader looks at both the content and context of the source. The next tool may move students and novice teachers further.

### Comparing sources

Comparing, contrasting, and classifying seem so matter of fact that they are often considered

to be examples of "low-level thinking". Yet these operations are crucial for thinking historically.<sup>2</sup> How can students recognize that there are different perspectives or ways of looking at people, events, or ideas unless they can actually see the differences in the form of competing interpretations, voices, assumptions, and values? The effects on student achievement are considerable (Marzano, Pickering, and Polluck, 2001).

This is why pairs of documents offering differing interpretations of the same "facts" are important for helping students recognize the nature of historical interpretation. Something as simple as a graphic organizer such as a venn diagram can help students work through interpretations.



The next section present a literacy orientation for busy teachers who often feel that literacy is best left to the English teacher yet may be held to account for promoting literacy in their subject areas by curriculum and assessment demands as is the case in Ontario. In that province all students must pass a cross-curricular literacy test administered in grade 10 or demonstrate equivalency through a follow-up course in order to graduate.

### **Reading and Writing to Learn**

Reading-to-learn (r-t-l) and writing-to-learn (w-t-l) represent sets of thinking tactics and productive habits of mind learners use when making sense of and communicating important ideas within specific curriculum areas (Jacobs, 2002; Grossman, Shoenfeld, with Lee, 2005). While this section seem to be just "common sense" and may be viewed as irrelevant to history education, my own experiences and the work of others suggests otherwise (Myers, 1999; Jacobs, op. cit.; Wineberg, 2006). The following principles are vital if we are to be serious about being critical literacy teachers:

- literacy and thinking are connected,
- the teaching needs to be explicit, with time provided for reading, writing, speaking, and listening,
- for many students, even in senior and university-destination courses, these tactics and habits of mind **MUST BE TAUGHT**. U.S. data suggests that senior students are poor at working with and through complex texts in the content areas (Valdés, Bunch, Snow, and Lee with Adams, 2005; Snow, Griffin, and Burns, 2005). Given the evidence that these skills and habits are not taught, this point is stressed.
- students need frequent opportunities to process and reflect on their learning,
- reading and writing has a purpose-students do read if they have a reason to,
- when appropriate offer choices-so that students can better match their reasons for reading and writing with your reasons,
- we remember the beginnings and the ends of things better than we do the middle; so r-t-l and w-t-l can help students focus on the body of the learning for a unit or lesson and

- consolidate it when it is done,
- r-t-l and w-t-l tasks provide scaffolding for better formal reading and writing
- purposeful talk supports all of these principles (space prevents a detailed look at this important principle but there are examples from a workshop at <http://ohassta.org/conference.htm> on the power of purposeful talk, including examples specific to history that have been successfully used in classes for decades),
- many writing-to-learn tasks are informal and take only a few minutes of class time or can be assigned as homework, but they help students think through interesting, provocative, and complex ideas. They are appealing because:
  - they do not need to be marked
  - they do not need to be completed works
  - they can be used to lead to more formal work
  - they help the reading process by promoting understanding of content and thus can serve as diagnostic assessment tools,

Among the possible r-t-l and w-t-l tasks teachers can do with primary sources both on-line and off-line are the following:

### Sample Reading-to-Learn Tasks

1. Examine the chart / map / photo / drawing at [http://www.\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_](http://www._____). What conclusions can you draw about "x"?
2. What is the artist's perspective of the event depicted at [http://www.\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_](http://www._____)?
3. Examine the data in [http://www.\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_](http://www._____). What patterns are evident?
4. Examine the title / caption for the image at [http://www.\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_](http://www._____). Change the title / rewrite the caption to one which more accurately reflects the information in the site.

### Sample Writing-to-Learn Tasks

1. Give chart / map / photo / drawing at [http://www.\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_](http://www._____) a title and a new one-sentence caption.
2. Rewrite the document written by \_\_\_\_\_ at [http://www.\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_](http://www._____). Use only one-third of the total number of words used in the passage you are to précis, but do not change the meaning of the passage. Have students share their responses with peers, looking for points of agreement or disagreement.
3. One liners: at the end of a reading from the text in a website have students write a one-line summary.

These and other examples can be used with secondary sources such as textbooks. They incorporate literacy with important content learning.

### Conclusions and An Agenda

There is now a network of teachers, academic and public historians, archivists and museologists, classroom teachers, and teacher educators. The History Education Network (T.H.E.N.) <http://www.historyeducation.ca> could work with other partners to conduct studies along the following lines

- What are the possibilities? What is on the internet that has potential for improving history teaching and learning? Here we can look for and assess primary source collections, games, simulations, and work done by teachers, school districts,

researchers, museums and archives.

- How are they used? Are we talking about information retrieval or historical inquiry?
- How do we prepare teachers and students for better use of these burgeoning resources through work in critical literacy, authentic inquiry, including not only the sources but the "sources" of the sources; namely, the validity of the websites themselves?

Teachers are busy people. Using new technologies may increase their workload as their ability to reach students. To help them we need simple yet powerful tools connected to a clear curricular vision. Working through literacy is one approach for helping us all work smarter. The article has offered a brief rationale for stressing literacy and some small steps for moving to integrate critical literacy to the use of new information technologies. It also proposes a research agenda incorporating the above for promoting history teaching and learning.

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup>The concept of "history as verb" and the inspiration for the diagram and grammatical metaphor comes from the work of Professor Ruth Sandwell, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, *History is a Verb: Using Primary Documents in the Social Studies and History Classroom*. (unpublished manuscript)

<sup>2</sup>There is a section in the document-based Begbie contest that recognizes the importance of simple comparisons. See <http://www.begbiecontestsociety.org> for examples.

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