Historicizing the Library:

Information Literacy Instruction in the History Classroom

Maura Seale

Introduction

In 2013, Georgetown University's Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship invited historian David Pace to work with the History department on redesigning its general education courses. Pace is best known for his Decoding the Disciplines Project, which focuses on disciplinary bottlenecks to learning, and emerged from his work on the History Learning Project.[1] The librarian for American and European history was invited to participate in the redesign workshops and offer the library's perspective.

As a result of the workshops, a subset of the general education (History 099) courses at Georgetown, a large doctoral university with approximately 7,500 undergraduate and 11,000 graduate students,[2] now include "History Lab." In History Lab, students are asked to essentially "do" history, which entails finding and engaging with both primary and secondary sources in ways that parallel how historians work with sources. The library instruction for these courses draws on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) in history as well as critical information literacy; its goal is to get students to think about library resources as historical rather than natural.

This is a crucial component of historical thinking and an essential element in empowering students to critically use library resources. Denaturalizing and historicizing library resources introduce distance into students' understanding of library resources and allows them to see how collections developed historically, how some primary sources were preserved while others were not, as well as how some primary sources that they are able to imagine might never have existed. It empowers students and allows them to use these

resources more effectively, to recognize that controlled vocabularies are constructed, that article indexes carry traces of their print predecessors, and that the information landscape is subject to the same sort of power dynamics as the social world.

This case study outlines several prominent theories in the SoTL in history and then traces how that scholarship was integrated with critical information literacy in Georgetown University's History 099 library instruction sessions.

Decoding the Disciplines

Decoding the Disciplines is a framework for teaching students how to engage in higher-order, disciplinary thinking. The reasons underlying this approach are that

> the mental operations required of undergraduates differ enormously from discipline to discipline, that these ways of thinking are rarely presented to students explicitly, that students generally lack an opportunity to practice and receive feedback on particular skills in isolation from others, and that there is rarely a systematic assessment of the extent to which students have mastered each of the ways of thinking that are essential to particular disciplines.[3]

The seven-step process of decoding begins by identifying the integral moments where students get stuck and are unable to progress in the discipline. These "bottlenecks" can be both cognitive and affective. The second step is where the decoding happens: the goal of this step is to "make explicit the mental operations that students must master in order to overcome specific bottlenecks in a course. Since many of these are so automatic to instructors that they have become invisible, a systematic process of deconstructing disciplinary practice is necessary."[4] Once these implicit mental moves are articulated, they can be modeled and students can practice with them. Although there are additional steps in the framework, this case study focuses on the first two steps.

Procedural Knowledge

Decoding the Disciplines, although meant to be applicable to all disciplines, echoes recent work on SoTL in history. In *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century*, Stephane Lévesque seeks to "devise a conceptualization of history and identify procedural concepts of the discipline relevant to twenty-first-century students, to give students the means to a more critical and disciplinary study of the past."[5] Crucial to Lévesque's understanding of history is the distinction between substantive and procedural knowledge. Substantive knowledge is knowledge of the content of history—the events, people, and other elements that constitute the past. It is the *what* of history. In contrast, procedural concepts are about "structuring or giving sense and coherence to events in history (concepts giving

shape to historical practice and thinking about the past).”[6] Procedural knowledge is the *how* of history. Lévesque focuses on procedural knowledge because it is core to disciplinary thinking in history and because it is what enables students to adopt a critical stance towards history, as well as heritage and myth, which are common-sense, uncritical uses of history: “Without procedural thinking, students are left passively absorbing the narratives and viewpoints of authorities, too puzzled or indifferent to use the tools and mechanisms for making sense of the past. Thus, students *cannot* practice history or even think critically about its content if they have no understanding of how one constructs and shares historical knowledge.”[7] When students grasp the *how* of history, they are able to unpack truth claims about the *what*. To Lévesque, “to think historically is thus to understand how knowledge has been constructed and what it means.”[8]

Lévesque identifies five procedural concepts, which are tied to “essential questions”: historical significance, continuity and change, progress and decline, evidence, and historical empathy.[9] As with the bottlenecks of Decoding the Disciplines, these ideas are central to history and students cannot progress without comprehending them, but they are not often articulated or taught.[10] Lévesque is careful to note that although he and other scholars such as Peter Seixas suggest these procedural elements of history are central to the practice of history, the elements themselves “should not be viewed as fixed or given but as developing, always problematic and incomplete, contingent on and limited by people’s own historiographical culture.”[11] As with other disciplines, history is produced and exists within historically specific social, political, and economic formations. The procedural concepts of history, or the rules of any discipline, then, are not eternal and unchanging, but instead constantly produced and reproduced.

Historical Thinking

Sam Wineburg’s pedagogical theory is rooted in what he terms “historical thinking.” Similar to Lévesque’s procedural knowledge, historical thinking is a method, approach, or epistemology, rather than the specific content of history. For Wineburg, historical thinking resides in the tension between familiarity and strangeness, “between feelings of proximity to and feelings of distance from the people we seek to understand. Neither of these poles does full justice to history’s complexity, and veering to one side or the other only dulls history’s jagged edges and leaves us with cliché and caricature.”[12] The familiarity and strangeness that constitute historical thinking cannot be resolved, as both are irreducible and essential; it is instead working within “two contradictory positions: first, that our established modes of thinking are an inheritance that cannot be sloughed off; second, that if we make no attempt to slough them off, we are doomed to a mind-numbing presentism that reads the present onto the past.”[13] Although Wineburg does not outline a framework as Lévesque does, his notion of historical thinking is fundamentally connected to asking questions, analyzing and synthesizing evidence, and practicing empathy. Wineburg also emphasizes approaching the past with “a kind of caution” and “humility before the narrowness of our contemporary experience”[14] to avoid presentism in efforts to make sense of history.

Uncoverage

In contrast to Wineburg and Lévesque, Lendol Calder specifically focuses on the traditional survey course, which rather than "covering" topics should "uncover" the processes by which history comes into being: "Survey instructors should aim to uncover history. We should be designing classroom environments that expose the very things hidden away by traditional survey instruction: the linchpin ideas of historical inquiry that are not obvious or easily comprehended; the inquiries, arguments, assumptions, and points of view that make knowledge what it is for practitioners of our discipline; the cognitive contours of history as an epistemological domain."[15] Similar to Decoding the Disciplines, the procedural knowledge of Lévesque and the historical thinking of Wineburg, Calder seeks to articulate how historians approach the past, rather than recounting the "facts." He identifies six elements of what he calls "historical mindedness": questioning, connecting, sourcing, making inferences, considering alternate perspectives, and recognizing limits to one's knowledge.[16] There are clear continuities with both Wineburg and Lévesque: the importance of questions, empathy and understanding the limitations of what can be known, and synthesis and analysis of evidence.

Calder, like Lévesque, notes that the ultimate goal is not just for students to do history but to learn to critically assess truth claims made about history. He calls this the "moral" dimension of history: "What the past means for our ethics and self-knowledge and how knowledge of the past shapes our general understanding of the world (and vice versa)."[17] Wineburg, too, emphasizes the political, moral, or ethical element of historical thinking: "Mature historical knowing teaches us to do the opposite: to go beyond our own image, to go beyond our brief life, and to go beyond the fleeting moment in human history into which we've been born."[18] For each of these scholars, doing history is rooted in perceiving and understanding the constructedness of narratives about the past and grappling with both the ongoing relevance of the past to the present and also its ultimate unknowability.[19] Doing history requires students to sit with irresolvable ideas of politics, power, and ambiguity.

Critical Information Literacy

In her recent book, *Critical Information Literacy: Foundations, Inspiration, and Ideas*, Annie Downey presents a working definition of critical information literacy (CIL) while acknowledging that there is no "fully developed and agreed upon definition."[20] CIL is grounded in a critical approach to information sources that seeks to unpack and understand the power dynamics and social, economic, and political contexts in which information is produced and used. It also recognizes the affective dimensions of research,[21] questions notions of neutrality and "skills,"[22] and promotes agency, empowerment, and sometimes liberation.[23]

In its emphasis on context, CIL might also be understood as historicizing or thinking historically about the library. CIL brings larger questions of power dynamics and political, economic, and social contexts of information to library instruction. Some library users

might think about using library systems through the prism of presentism and assume their workings are transparent and obvious to users.[24] Many might not pay attention to the histories that have led to current library systems, but these systems are the products of specific decisions and choices made by particular actors. Rather than teaching the "facts" or *what* of library systems, historicizing the library seeks to get at the *how* by uncovering their historical constructedness. Historicizing library systems and, by extension, the library research process is a key element in locating them within larger social formations; to historicize is to denaturalize and make obvious the constructedness. The project of historicizing the library seeks to uncover the "jagged edges" of libraries and to get students and other users to question the library, to understand it as always incomplete and inflected by the social world, rather than taking it at face value. This project also seeks to empower those who conduct library research and use library systems. When the constructedness of the library is uncovered and revealed, it is no longer mysterious, and users are able to employ it to their own ends; they are able to question it and approach it critically, rather than simply adapting to its limitations and drawbacks. These moves work to introduce a critical distance between users of library systems and those systems themselves. That distance is necessary for questioning, challenging, and, ultimately, effectively using those systems to conduct library research. As such, historicizing the library resonates with the broad ethos and goals of CIL.

Historicizing the Library in Practice

The Georgetown History faculty very much wanted students in general education courses to practice doing history and included it in the learning goals: "Students will be introduced to the rudiments of historical research, including the use of library and online resources, basic notions of historiography, and the purpose and practice of proper citation methods."[25] The workshops, using the Decoding the Disciplines framework and History Learning Project, thought through the bottlenecks in historical research and writing, and tried to articulate the tacit knowledge, thought processes, and practices that experts bring to historical research and writing. The workshops also looked at ways to model and have students practice working through these bottlenecks during History Lab. The bottlenecks included reading and comprehending a scholarly article, finding both primary and secondary sources, working with primary sources as evidence, analyzing textual and non-textual primary sources (images, music, maps, data, material culture), and citation.[26] Each of these bottlenecks would eventually become the subject of a History Lab. Identifying and explicitly teaching these practices speaks not just to Calder's call for uncovering what historians do, but also touches on Lévesque's procedural knowledge and its emphasis on evidence.

These specific bottlenecks were contextualized by broader bottlenecks of historical practice: understanding that history is not a series of facts, but analysis and interpretation based on evidence; the importance of contingency; and that as interpreters of history, individuals are situated historically, and their viewpoints are not neutral, objective, or

transparent. These bottlenecks resonate with Wineburg's notion of historical thinking and the approach and goals of critical information literacy. With both history and the library, students tend toward presentism or interpreting the unfamiliar in terms of what they already know. This works against the questioning and analysis of evidence emphasized by both SoTL in history and CIL and, ultimately, against students effectively using library systems to conduct research. Students need to recognize the strangeness of library systems without being put off by it, to paraphrase T. Mills Kelly, and work between familiarity and strangeness.[27]

Library systems and research practices, too, are situated historically, and library instruction that foregrounds this concept can counter the bottleneck of presentism. Information is always produced, organized, and consumed within specific historical contexts, and expert library research is grounded in and draws on historical thinking. The library instruction sessions for History Lab focused on two broad concepts that work to historicize the library. The first is an understanding of the overarching history of library systems and how that history can be seen in the ways systems are currently structured. For example, online library catalogs still rely on metadata and controlled vocabulary as access points, just as physical card catalogs did, while article indexes duplicate indexes that once appeared in print format, like *Historical Abstracts*. The second concept is library system architecture, which is also often tied to the individual histories of systems. This includes distinctions between different forms of searching (full-text, record, specific field) and more abstract concepts like metadata and controlled vocabulary. Instruction that focuses on these concepts uncovers what libraries and librarians do, just as Calder seeks to uncover what historians do, and reveals library systems to be historical and constructed. Understanding how library systems work and then practicing research with that new knowledge gets students closer to the *how* of library systems and research. This approach articulates, models, and then asks students to practice Lévesque's procedural knowledge of the library.

Other concepts can be used to further point to the history and constructedness of library systems and research. Controlled vocabulary is not just a useful way to refine a search, it is also often inaccurate, dated, and makes assumptions about the social world—for example, that whiteness, maleness, and cis-ness do not need to be named, presumably because they are normal. Databases such as of *America: History & Life* and *Historical Abstracts* began as print indexes and now, as article databases, they cover different sets of journals due to their origins as print indexes. Journal articles are also commodities, though, and so the form of these databases is unlikely to change given the economics of scholarly publishing. Primary source databases require huge amounts of labor to produce and, as such, students only have access to these materials because libraries purchase them. This directly affects which primary sources are accessible at any given institution. Readex's *America's Historical Imprints* and Gale's *Sabin Americana* are based on bibliographies compiled by white Anglo-American men during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[28] The sources in these databases, the sources students have easy access to because they were compiled, digitized, and then purchased by Georgetown, are necessarily subject to contemporary notions of value, importance, and authority at play in the creation of the bibliographies and their digital counterparts and in Georgetown's purchasing of the databases.

The goal is not that students retain all of this information but rather to openly articulate and uncover aspects of library systems and research that they might not have considered before, so that they might question them instead of assuming their transparency. Learning about the library in these terms works against presentism by denaturalizing the present and tracing its connections with the past. Questioning is at the heart of doing history because it indicates engagement with rather than rejection of history's unfamiliarity and ambiguity, an engagement that seeks to make sense of and understand. As Lévesque, Wineburg, Calder, and Kelly suggest from the perspective of the SoTL in history, and as CIL theorists, scholars, and practitioners describe, the ability to question is ultimately empowering for students. Uncovering the library opens a critical distance between users and library systems and research; it creates a space in which questioning can occur and the realization that these systems can, and should be, questioned.

The Decoding the Disciplines framework uncovers the how and why of what librarians and historians do. To uncover is to make legible. Once something is legible, it can be understood and used by others. Being able to explain disciplinary practices to students so that they may do them themselves ultimately empowers students to participate in disciplinary conversations and learn on their own and destabilizes notions of disciplinary power and authority. Disciplinary research and practice become something anyone can engage in to some extent and less of an exclusive club with limited membership. Integrating Decoding the Disciplines and the SoTL in history can help library instruction move toward critical information literacy, toward empowering students, even when discussing ideas as mundane as controlled vocabulary and article indexes. Empowering students to become thoughtful and critical actors in the world is, ultimately, what Lévesque, Wineburg, and Calder argue historical thinking fosters and what critical information literacy instruction rooted in historical thinking can promote.

Conclusion

Decoding the Disciplines offers a framework for reflecting on and revising instructional practice by drawing on classroom experience and disciplinary expertise. As such, it offers a way for faculty and librarians to speak across various boundaries, whether of semester-long courses as opposed to one-shot workshops or subject-specific rather than generalist expertise—and for librarians to understand and articulate information literacy or library instruction as of a piece with disciplinary thinking, and thus vital. The SoTL in history largely follows Decoding the Disciplines in its attempts to unpack expert practice in history and then have students work through it. Lévesque's procedural knowledge, Wineburg's historical thinking, and Calder's uncoverage represent varying but overlapping ways of grappling with and articulating historical practice; the overarching goal to empower students to engage thoughtfully with the past and present. CIL likewise seeks to empower students to participate critically in library systems and research. The project of historicizing the library draws together these approaches to develop a library pedagogy that focuses on helping students think historically about library systems and research.

ENDNOTES

1. "Decoding the Disciplines," *Decoding the Disciplines*, accessed February 6, 2018, http://decodingthedisciplines.org/; Arlene Diaz, Joan Middendorf, David Pace, and Leah Shopkow, "The History Learning Project: A Department 'Decodes' Its Students," *Journal of American History* 94, no. 4 (2008): 1211–24.

2. Georgetown University Office of Assessment and Decision Support, "2016–2017 Common Data Set," Georgetown Office of Assessment and Decision Support, accessed February 6, 2018, https://oads.georgetown.edu/commondataset.

3. Joan Middendorf and David Pace, "Decoding the Disciplines: A Model for Helping Students Learn Disciplinary Ways of Thinking," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 2004, no. 98 (2004): 3.

4. "Step 2: Uncover the Mental Operations that Students Must Master to Get Past the Bottleneck," *Decoding the Disciplines*, accessed October 27, 2017, http://decodingthedisciplines.org/step-2-uncover-the-mental-task/.

5. Stéphane Lévesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 8.

6. Lévesque, *Thinking Historically*, 16.

7. Ibid., 17.

8. Ibid., 27.

9. Ibid., 37.

10. Ibid., 32.

11. Ibid., 33.

12. Sam Wineburg, "Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 80, no. 7 (1999): 490.

13. Wineburg, "Historical Thinking," 493.

14. Ibid., 497; Donald A. Yerxa, ed., *Recent Themes in Historical Thinking: Historians in Conversation* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 37.

15. Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *The Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (2006): 1363.

16. Calder, "Uncoverage," 1364.

17. Ibid., 1366.

18. Wineburg, "Historical Thinking," 498.

19. T. Mills Kelly, *Teaching History in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 22–23, itemizes commonalities in the theorizing of historical thinking: "The ability to tell the difference between a primary and a secondary source. The ability to "source the source"; that is, figure out who created the source, when it was created, and so on. The ability to obtain information about the authority of the source and to assess that authority in light of other evidence. The ability to set sources in their proper chronological order and to understand why that ordering is important. The ability to construct an original argument based upon evidence from various sources. The ability to recognize the strangeness of the past without being put off by that strangeness. The ability to make comparative judgments about evidence. The ability to recognize what one does not or cannot know from the evidence at hand. The ability to understand that events are understood differently by different people. The ability to triangulate between and among sources. The ability to ask probing questions—not just what happened, but why did it happen this way and why didn't it happen that way? The ability to recognize the role of causality. The ability to critique evidence both on its own terms and in terms of its value to a larger analytical project. The ability to recognize lines of argument in historical thought. The ability to present the past in clear ways, whether in writing or in other media, saying what can be said and not saying what cannot."

20. Annie Downey, *Critical Information Literacy: Foundations, Inspiration, and Ideas* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2016), 41.

21. Maria T. Accardi, Emily Drabinski, and Alana Kumbier, *Critical Library Instruction: Theories and Methods* (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2010), xiii.

22. Eamon Tewell, "A Decade of Critical Information Literacy: A Review of the Literature," *Communications in Information Literacy* 9, no. 1 (2015): 25.

23. Tewell, "A Decade of Critical Information Literacy"; Accardi, Drabinski, and Kumbier, *Critical Library Instruction*.

24. This is a broad generalization, but as Wineburg points out, this is "our psychological condition at rest," "Historical Thinking," 496.

25. Georgetown University History Department, "Learning Goals for all Academic Programs," Georgetown Department of History, accessed October 27, 2017, https://history.georgetown.edu/about/learning-goals#.

26. These are similar to the bottlenecks identified in the History Learning Project. Diaz, Middendorf, Pace, and Shopkow, "History Learning Project," 1223.

27. Kelly, *Teaching History in the Digital Age*, 22.

28. Readex's *America's Historical Imprints* is based on Charles Evans's *The American Bibliography: A Chronological Dictionary of All Books, Pamphlets and Periodical Publications Printed in the United States of America from the Genesis of Printing in 1639 Down to and Including the Year 1820, with Bibliographical and Biographical Notes*, which he began compiling in 1902. Clifford Shipton continued the work after Evans's death in 1935. Ralph Shaw and Richard H. Shoemaker extended the bibliography's coverage through 1829. Evans was affiliated with the American Antiquarian Society and co-founded the American Library Association. Shipton was the head librarian of the American Antiquarian Association. Shaw and Shoemaker also worked in libraries. Shipton's influence on the *Bibliography*, and the resulting digital collection, can be seen in its geographic focus on areas that would become the United States and concomitant exclusion of other parts of British America and exclusion of non-English language material. The Bibliography was a site for arguments by Shipton and his contemporaries about "what constituted the print heritage of America" and, hence, America itself. David S. Shields, "On the Circumstances Surrounding the Creation of *Early American Literature*," *Early American Literature* 50, no. 1 (2015): 24; Brendan Rapple, "Evans, Charles (1850–1935), Librarian and Bibliographer," *American National Biography*, accessed February 25, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.article.2000327. *Sabin Americana* is based on Joseph Sabin's *A Dictionary of Books Relating to America, from Its Discovery to the Present Time*, also known as *Biblioteca Americana*. Sabin was an Anglo-American bookseller. After his death, the *Biblioteca* was completed with funding from the Carnegie Corporation under the direction of librarians Wilberforce Eames and R. W. G. Vail. John Mark Tucker, "Sabin, Joseph (1821–1881), Bibliographer and Bookseller," *American National Biography*, accessed February 25, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1093/anb/9780198606697.article.2000309. These are very brief overviews of the histories of two digital primary source databases, but all library resources have similar histories. For in-depth examples of "doing history" with library resources, see Ian Gadd, "The Use and Misuse of *Early English Books Online*," *Literature Compass* 6, no. 3 (2009): 680–92 and Bonnie Mak, "Archaeology of a Digitization," *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 65, no. 8 (2014): 1515–26.

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