Why Historical Thinking Is Not about History[1]

By Sam Wineburg

The point I want to make today might sound peculiar for those of you familiar with my work. My claim is that historical thinking is not about history.

To illustrate, let me tell you a story about a news item that appeared back in October 2010. The *Washington Post* broke a story about a fourth-grade textbook in Virginia called *Our Virginia, Past and Present*. The book contains a description of the role African Americans played in the Civil War.[2]

Now, if you are a movie aficionado, and have seen *Glory* and the stories of the 54th Massachusetts and the 180,000 African Americans who served the Union forces—constituting over 10 percent of the Union forces—then you might expect that to be the focus of this section.

Wrong. *Our Virginia, Past and Present* presented Virginia fourth graders with little known historical information: "Thousands of Southern blacks fought in the Confederate ranks, including two battalions under the command of Stonewall Jackson." Now this had to be at the height of the Civil War because, as y'all remember, Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson died from friendly fire by his own troops on May 10, 1863.[3]

It has long been known that the Confederate army forced slaves into service as cooks and laborers who provided backup for weapons-bearing troops. We know of dozens of cases like this. We even have some scattered photographs of slaves suited up in uniform sitting next to their masters.

But that's not what we're talking about. We are talking about the formal mustering of thousands of black soldiers under Jackson alone, and by extension, thousands more under other generals, who trained them in weaponry and taught them to fight for the South. All at a time when the North was still debating the issue of enlisting black troops.

What evidence supports these claims? The only document that we have from the Confederacy about drafting African American soldiers comes in the waning days of the war, a last-ditch effort less than three weeks before the surrender at Appomattox. If thousands of blacks were already bearing arms for the Confederacy, why did the South have to enact General Orders 14, on March 23, 1865? The proposal was so controversial that its drafters felt compelled to issue a disclaimer: "Nothing in this act shall be construed to authorize a change in the relation which the said slaves shall bear toward their owners."[4]

Where would *Our Virginia, Past and Present* find backing for a claim rejected out of hand by every reputable Civil War historian we could think of? There is no documentation for these claims, no record; none of the sources we would expect make mention of them. We can find no evidence for claims
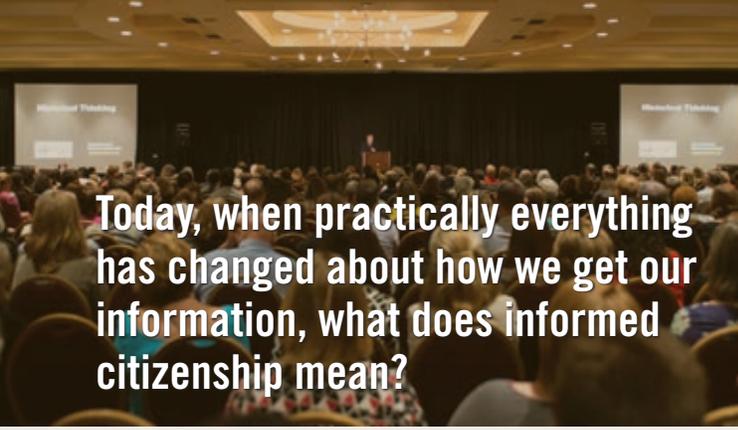
Today, when practically everything has changed about how we get our information, what does informed citizenship mean?

that so contravene common sense and, I might add, human nature. What would slaves be fighting for, anyway? Their "right" to remain shackled?

When the *Washington Post* asked author Joy Masoff for her sources, she reported that she turned to the Internet for research. Her publisher, Five Ponds Press, sent the *Post* three of the links Masoff used, all of which traced back to the same source: the Sons of the Confederate Veterans, "A patriotic, historical and educational organization, founded in 1896, dedicated to honoring the sacrifices of the Confederate soldier and sailor and to preserving Southern Culture."[5]

Our first inclination might be to have a little chuckle at Masoff's expense. And I don't think any of us would dispute that it's unfortunate that her assertions ended up in a textbook for fourth graders. But I want to strike a serious note and suggest that Masoff is not so different from you and me.

We live in an age when going to the library means turning on our laptops and making sure that we have a wireless connection. Being on the Web and searching for information is radically different from how anyone who learned to do research a generation ago went about it.

Back in the uncomplicated pre-Web days, libraries and archives were places of quiet stability and authority. At age ten, when I did my first research paper (a report on the mystery of the Bermuda Triangle), going to the library meant being inducted into a sacred order where one learned hieroglyphics in order to decipher the *Readers Guide to Periodic Literature.*

It was obviously never the case that just because something was printed meant that it was true. At the same time, we often ceded authority to established publishers. We relied on them to make sure that what we read was accurate, that it had gone through rounds of criticism before it reached our eyes. Only a small number of us were actual authors. Most of us consumed information that others had produced.

The reality we inhabit, that our children inhabit, that those kids who come on field trips to our institutions inhabit, is a very, very different reality. The Internet has obliterated authority. You need no one's permission to create a website. You need no papers signed to put up a YouTube video. You need no one's stamp of approval to post a picture on Instagram. You can tweet to your heart's content—some of you are doing so this very moment. We live in an age when you can practice historiography without a license. Go ahead—be an author! What determines whether you go viral is not the blessing from some university egghead, but from the digital mob.[6]

Think back to claims that our president was born in Kenya. This was a claim embraced by many prominent figures, including a current Republican candidate for president. And there on YouTube was an actual tape, a tape of Sarah Obama, the president's grandmother, being interviewed by an American cleric about the circumstances of our president's birth.[7]

So I wanted to do an experiment with the generation often referred to as digital natives. I was asked to give a talk at a highly regarded independent school. The administration had assembled their sophomore and junior classes, over 100 students. I asked these kids how many of them had heard that President Obama had been born in Kenya. Sophisticated and well-heeled, they looked at me as if I came from outer space.

But then, knowing teenagers as I do, I appealed to their bravado. "I assume," I said, "that if you are so certain, you all must have examined the evidence. I assume all of you have heard the tape of Sarah Obama, the president's paternal grandmother, talking about being 'present' at her grandson's birth. Just so I can be sure, please raise your hand if you've listened to this tape." No hands went in the air. "Soooooo," I taunted them, "you're judging a claim without looking at the evidence?" And then—those of you who work with teenagers will recognize this move—I asked, "Are you open- or closed-minded?" I've yet to meet a teenager who admits to close-mindedness.

I played the tape. Sarah Obama, a woman who had never left Kenya, claimed that she was "present" at her grandson's birth. Someone's a liar. Either an eighty-six-year-old woman or the President of the United States. Now, with a little bit of nudging, students started to motivate some questions. Had the tape been doctored? No, it had been examined forensically. It was authentic. What about the material that comes before and after the part I played—a lovely question, very pertinent to historical thinking. Another wanted to know if the translation into English was correct, an astute question because Sarah Obama was speaking Swahili, not her native language. What happens to this word "present" as it moves from Luo, Sarah Obama's native language, to her broken Swahili and then into English? Does it mean she was physically present? Or, that she merely *heard* of her grandson's birth?

"What else would we want to know about the tape?" I pressed on. But it seemed that I had exhausted the bank of student questions. Despite the fact that many of these digital natives were headed to top colleges, they were still babes in the woods when it came to asking rudimentary questions of historical thinking: Who authored this tape? How did it come to be? Who was this Bishop Ron McCrae, the head of the Anabaptist Church of North America, the man heard speaking to Sarah Obama's interpreter? How would we find out? Such questions—the ABCs of historical thinking—were anything but intuitive to this group of bright teenagers.

Let me suggest, then, that it is one thing to be a digital native and quite another to be digitally *intelligent*. Long before the Internet, Thomas Jefferson argued for the wisdom of the yeoman farmer, a person who would think, discern, and come to reasoned conclusions in the face of conflicting information. Today, when practically everything has changed about how we get our information, what does informed citizenship mean?

The most critical question facing young people today is not how to find information. Google has done a great job with that. We're bombarded by stuff. The real question is whether that information, once found, should be *believed*. And according to some recent studies, young people are not doing so well in that department.

The most extensive work on this question has been done by Eszter Hargittai and her colleagues at Northwestern University. Hargittai engaged dozens of college students—her total sample was over 100—in a study of how young people determined the trustworthiness of information they encountered on the Web. She gave college students a series of questions and sent them surfing, recording their screen shots and comments as they searched.[8]

The upshot of Hargittai's work was that students ceded to Google questions of credibility. The higher up in a Google search, the more credible the entry. Sometimes students remarked that they considered the qualifications of the author before believing what they found, but in no instance of the screen captures could the researchers find evidence that author credibility steered students' decisions.

The first thing that historical study teaches us is that there is no such thing as free-floating information. Information comes from somewhere. And if you think I'm exaggerating the gravity of the situation, let me tell you about an incident that happened in May 2014 in Rialto, California, a community outside of San Bernardino. It is not an incident about students. It is about an assignment put together by their teachers.

Teachers gave their middle school students a written exam inspired by the new Common Core State Standards. Teachers went on the Internet and culled what they believed were credible documents, each one presenting a different view. The issue under debate was the Holocaust. Students were told to review a set of historical interpretations and to compose an essay arguing whether the Holocaust was real or whether it was a "propaganda tool" concocted by world Jewry for "political and monetary gain."[9]

One of the "credible" documents teachers put into children's hands claimed that the *Diary of Anne Frank* was a fake; that piles of corpses from Auschwitz were murdered Germans, not Jews; and that there are are "compelling reasons why the so-called Holocaust never happened." Dozens of eighth graders found this document the most compelling. As one wrote, "The Holocaust is a propaganda tool. So Israel can make money for Jews. The Holocaust is a hoax because the gas chambers in concetration [sic] camps were faulty. Another reason why this event never really happened becuase [sic] the Diary of Anne Frank is a hoax too. This is why no Jew has ever been gassed to death in these gas chambers."[10]

When an investigative reporter for the *San Bernardino Sun* contacted the school district, officials said that this type of essay was an exception. But through California's version of the Freedom of Information Act, the indefatigable Beau Yarbrough, who won an award from the Associated Press for his muckraking, obtained the essays that students wrote. It turns out that dozens of middle school students became Holocaust deniers through their teachers' efforts.

When the story got out, the Rialto school board held emergency meetings and decided that students and teachers should visit the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles and receive sensitivity training to ensure that an incident like this never happened again. But in my humble opinion, this is a gross misdiagnosis of the problem. I don't believe these teachers were racists or prejudiced or bigoted or benighted or living in sin. I do not think that they needed mandatory sensitivity training. I think that they—like their students, like Joy Masoff, like us—are living in an age where technological changes of how information is disseminated and distributed far outpace our ability to keep up with them. The tools we have invented are handling us—not us them.

Throw in for good measure Common Core, and the fact that a few years ago we were telling teachers to write standards on the board and to quiz students on facts, and now we are telling them to give students multiple documents representing conflicting positions (but providing little or no professional development for new ways of teaching), and you have the recipe for a perfect storm. That's what happened in Rialto. A perfect storm with the ingredients amply supplied by the Internet.

That's where we're at. Captives to the machines we have built. And when we pause to gather our thoughts and ask, how in the world do we get up to speed, we can again turn to the Internet. There we can download thick PDFs packed with dozens of activities to teach information literacy. These materials come with extensive checklists that list rows of questions for students to ask every time they surf a website.

If we had all of the time in the world, I'd applaud. Let's use these PDFs; let's do scores of classroom activities. But our situation is dire. We're the guy on the emergency room floor, hemorrhaging profusely, blood spilling on the linoleum, and the nurse comes in and instead of attending to our wound asks us to examine a booklet with thirty-seven possibilities for how to stanch the bleeding. By the time we figure it out, we're goners.

So here's a little thought experiment. Imagine you're a carpenter and you have to go to a work site where you will find plenty of wood. But you have no idea of what you will be asked to build. You can only bring *two* tools. Not power tools. Hand-operated. Which tools will you choose? A saw? A hammer? A chisel, perhaps?

What's in our *digital* toolbox? What are two—not four or six or twenty—but *two* tools that every student and every middle school teacher should have before we let them loose on the Internet?

I'll make it a bit more concrete. Say we're doing a webquest with our students, researching Adolph Hitler. We put "Hitler" in the search bar and up comes the "The Adolf Hitler Historical Museum." Since we know that students assess credibility by how far up an entry is on a Google search, we see that this one is way up there. Moreover, the URL is not a dot-com site—which our guidebooks say is bad—but a more respectable dot-org site. Our students press on the link and find this explanation of Hitler Museum.

"The teaching of history should convey only facts and be free from political motives, personal opinions, biases, propaganda and other common tactics of distortion. Every claim
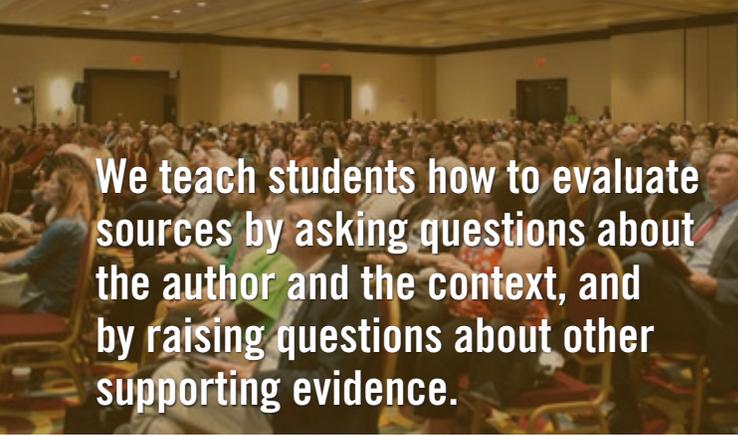
> **We teach students how to evaluate sources by asking questions about the author and the context, and by raising questions about other supporting evidence.**

that is made about history should also be accompanied by documentation proving its basis."[11]

Not a bad start, I'd say.

I recently showed this site to a group of college students in a U.S. history survey class. It was in one of those old-style amphitheater lecture halls, where the professor stands in the orchestra pit and looks up at rows of students. I saw a sea of baseball hats turned three quarters to the side and laptops open at nearly every seat.

I showed the students the site of the Hitler Museum. "How many of you use the Internet for research?" I asked. All hands went up. "Keep your hands up if you can come down here and in one click, one, show me who owns this site." Like the wave at a sporting event, the hands collapsed (including those of the faculty in attendance). My crooked baseball hat-wearing college students, all with laptops open—probably grazing Facebook, Twitter, and ESPN as I was talking—were rendered click-less.

The answer is not a mystery. "Whois," which can be reached by circumventing your browser and using your computer's terminal (or can be accessed via a variety of sites, like whois.net), provides a quick answer. In this particular instance, Whois leads you not to some big organization, but to a Gmail account and a post office box in a strip mall. In short, a fly-by-night operation.

That's my hammer. What about a saw? The next question I asked students was the same question my mother asked me when I was seventeen and going out on weekends. Mom, "Where are you going?" Me, "Out." Mom, "Out with *whom?*" Me, "People." Mom (about to scream), "*Which* people?!"

My mother wanted to know "which people" because we are known by our associates. In a digital world, we're known by our digital pack: who links to our site. I asked the students to tell me how I would find out who links to the Adolph Hitler Historical Museum. I waited. For Godot. (A simple Google query, www.website.com, solves the problem. In this case, the digital pack includes sites associated with Aryan hate groups.)

Simple questions. Who owns a site? Who links to it? Forget about power drills and pneumatic nail guns. Can we start with a hammer and a saw?

As some of you might know, my colleagues and I have a free digital curriculum that we distribute at sheg.stanford.edu that focuses on ways of reading historical sources that we call *Reading Like a Historian*. The curriculum, which to our amazement has been downloaded three million times, poses legitimate historical questions and provides teachers

and students with original sources that shed light on these questions from different perspectives. We teach students how to evaluate sources by asking questions about the author and the context, and by raising questions about other supporting evidence.

But it's time for me to come clean about the real intention of the *Reading Like a Historian* curriculum. Our materials have nothing to do with preparing students to be historians. If our curriculum has any pretense of career preparation, it is for the vocation of citizen.

Back in the analog Stone Age we could rely on fact-checked newspapers to stay well-informed. Watching the news at night, we could rely on the major outlets and their anchors to save us from error. Peter Jennings. Tom Brokaw. Brian Williams. (Okay, maybe not Brian Williams.)

What once fell on the shoulders of editors, fact-checkers, and subject matter experts now falls on the shoulders of each and every one of us. But there's a problem with this new reality. As the journalist John H. McManus reminds us, in a democracy, the ill-informed hold just as much power in the ballot box as the well-informed. The future of the republic hangs in the balance.[12]

Reliable information is to civic intelligence what clean air and clean water are to public health. Long before the Internet, long before blogs, before Instagram, before Twitter and Yik Yak, James Madison understood what was at stake when people cannot tell the difference between credible information and shameless bluff. "A popular government," Madison wrote, "without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives."[13] ◉

Sam Wineburg is the Margaret Jacks Professor of Education and a professor of history, by courtesy, at Stanford University, where he directs the doctoral program in history education as part of the Stanford History Education Group. He can be reached at wineburg@stanford.edu

[1] Talk given to the annual meeting of the AASLH, Louisville, KY, 17 September, 2015.

[2] Kevin Sieff, "Virginia Fourth Grade Textbook Criticized over Claims on Black Confederate Soldiers," *Washington Post* 10 October 2010.

[3] Ibid.

[4] See www.freedmen.umd.edu/csenlist.htm.

[5] See the fact sheet at www.scv.org/documents/edpapers/blackhistory.pdf.

[6] Karen Nahon and Jeff Hemsley, *Going Viral* (Polity: Cambridge, UK), 2013.

[7] See www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGWcD5OHm08.

[8] Eszter Hargittai, Lindsay Fullerton, Ericka Menchen-Trevino, and Kristin Yates Thomas. "Trust Online: Young Adults' Evaluation of Web Content," *International Journal of Communication*, 4: 468-494.

[9] Beau Yarbrough, "Rialto Unified Defends Writing Assignment on Confirming or Denying Holocaust," *San Bernardino Sun*, 4 May 2014.

[10] See s3.documentcloud.org/documents/1274350/rialto-usd-document-prod-4-of-4.pdf.

[11] I am indebted to T. Mills Kelly for this example. See his important, *Teaching History in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

[12] John H. McManus, *Detecting Bull: How to Identify Bias and Junk Journalism in Print, Broadcast and on the Wild Web* (Sunnyvale: CA, Unvarnished Press, 2012).

[13] James Madison, writing to W. T. Berry, 4 August 1822, downloaded from *The Founders Constitution*, press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch18s35.html.