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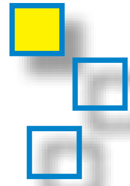

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Why You Read Like an Expert – and Why Your Students Probably Don't like

A recent experience in class left me a bit rattled, and made me wonder if I've long been trying to teach an impossible skill. It confronted me with a fundamental question: What's teachable, and what do students simply have to figure out on their own with the passage of time?

We were just beginning discussion of a new book in an intermediate-level historical methods course. Before plunging into the book's content, I asked students to describe to me the exact procedure they employed when they began to read it. *(Utter silence. They feared I was trying to trick them somehow.)*

I tried to clarify: "Tell me the precise steps you took. The book was sitting there, right? And you had to read it. So, what exactly did you do?"

One brave soul finally weighed in, though with trepidation. "I picked the book up, opened it to page one, and… began reading it." *(A collective exhale emanated from his classmates, as they realized they'd all done the same. Strength in numbers.)*

"Yes, but why should we believe this book, or even take it seriously?" I asked. "Are those important things to know at the outset?" *(Of course, they agreed.)* "How would we go about answering such questions?"

The responses started coming, slowly at first but then in a torrent. *(It's published by a well-known university press. The author is a professor at Prestigious Institution Y. There are extensive endnotes indicating where his information came from.)* "Okay, now take out your smartphones." *(Yippee!)* "Can you find out what the author's been up to since he published this?" *(Quite a bit, and it all looks impressive.)* "If you Google the book's title, what do you find?" *(References everywhere, and the title even has its own Wikipedia page!)* "Has it been reviewed a lot and in a variety of journals across disciplines?" *(Yes and yes.)*

What we'd just done is known as the "sourcing heuristic," that is, determining the origin and legitimacy of a text before reading the text itself. According to history education specialist Sam Wineburg, professional historians naturally source their readings this way, whereas only a small minority of students do so. And it's not just historians: give a book to just about any academic and ask her what she makes of it. The most important "tell" is that she'll flip the text over and "read" it from the back: *Who's the author and publisher? Who wrote the endorsement blurbs? What does the bibliography look like? Who's mentioned in the acknowledgements?* A strange thing is that academics do this automatically (and I've run this experiment successfully many times; try it yourself sometime with an audience of professors). Perhaps even more strangely, no one can ever remember precisely when they started to do it or even being taught the technique. It just happened at some point in our training or careers and we don't seem to notice doing it anymore.

I begin instructing my classes in the sourcing heuristic in their freshman year, and this group of students – some of whom I'd already taught – was well beyond that. Moreover, as our in-class inquiry above indicates, the task of rudimentary sourcing is far from impossible. Yet, no one had scrutinized this text on their own, even though some of them had already been trained explicitly in the technique, and even though all of them readily agreed that knowing such information was crucial. So, I pressed my luck a bit.

"What will you do when you have to read the next book for class?" *(Utter silence. It was as if the previous fifteen minutes had never happened.)*

"No, seriously. We just went through all this. You proved you can do it and you agree it's important. So, will you do it on your own next time?"

Finally, a nervous voice: "No. I mean, you assigned us the book, so it has to be legitimate and important, right?" *(Heads nod all around.)*

Therein lies the conundrum. The sourcing task itself is straightforward, but if I'm perceived as a gatekeeper to reliable scholarship, why should they bother? More importantly, if the students have to be prodded into doing the task every time, have they actually learned anything?

In this vein, I'm reminded of a story told by Randy Bass, a leader in the scholarship of teaching and learning movement. Overhearing some of his English students say that they couldn't believe the professor thought *Oregon Trail* was a good book, Bass couldn't resist intervening. "I think it is a horrible book," he explained. But, he added, "I think it is an *important* book."

I can take solace that my group of students at least recognizes the importance of the books we read for class. But the reason for the texts' perceived status is a far cry from what I hoped to instill. If a transcendent goal is to make these students independent learners, they may be doomed when they leave my classroom and have to navigate texts on their own. Indeed, I've had ostensibly well-trained seniors submit research paper

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Faculty Meeting - December 3 (Info)
Classes End - December 5
Exams - December 8-12
Commencement - December 13
Holiday Break - December 24-31

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First Monday of the Month

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Using Attendance Questions to Build Community, Enhance Teaching

"What is one of your pet peeves?" That question is among those I might ask my students at the start of nearly every class session as a way of taking attendance. Asking about pet peeves always elicits a lively, engaged discussion. Faces light up, and everyone wants to share their own personal irritants. This engagement never happens when taking attendance is nothing more than reading names from the roster with an answer of "Here" or "Present."

"What is your earliest memory of a house you lived in?" Nearly two decades ago, I was called upon to teach Introduction to Public Speaking for the first time. One of the issues with which I struggled was how my students could be encouraged/compelled to speak at least once in every class session. It didn't seem right that they might be able to get in and out of a speech class without speaking. The method I stumbled upon to alleviate that possibility was to ask a question that invites a bit of reflection and possible self-disclosure. Generally, I answer the question first to model a potential response.

"What are you afraid of?" Most recently when I taught Intro to Public Speaking, I raised the stakes slightly by asking the students to go to the front of the room to answer the attendance question. Several were clearly nervous (or terrified) at the start of the semester, even though they were guaranteed 100% credit simply for attempting an answer. Every member of the class later agreed, too, that when delivering their assigned speeches, the front of the room was not nearly so frightening; they had been there before many times, and they had spoken to their classmates before.

"Who is one person you will never forget?" Some teachers are very good at learning student names. That's not one of my gifts, but hearing about who the students are and what is important to them is a tremendous help. Another very helpful side benefit is that the students see their instructor more as a human being, rather than simply the classroom boss. In addition, while I was teaching at a large research university, students reported that, when walking across campus, they saw people they recognized from hearing their answers to these attendance questions; they reported not knowing students from other classes of similar or smaller size. Admittedly, I've never used this strategy in classes with much more than thirty students and would not recommend it for large lecture sections.

"If you could eat only one food for the rest of your life, what would you choose?" That question was a student suggestion. The difficulty of answering it points up another aspect of this whole issue: how to choose the questions. I keep a file of questions, moving ones I've used this semester into a different section and adding student suggestions on the days when it's their turn. Also, it's important to think about how long the answers are likely to take; on days when the class agenda is already quite full, a question that calls for long answers is not the best choice. Sometimes a question to stimulate thinking about the topic for the day is the best option. Other times, a question related to news, culture, or even weather will be better. All in all, sensitivity to what's going on in the class and the larger world should guide the choice.

"What has been your favorite attendance question (and response) this semester?" As long as I've been using this strategy in my classes, it has always been identified as a favorite of the students. This alone is not sufficient reason to adopt any technique, but it clearly enhances student engagement. If nothing else, these attendance questions are a simple method for building community within the classroom. Isn't that something we all want?

"Who was/is the most effective teacher you've had? What made him or her effective?"

Lew Kaye-Skinner, PhD, adjunct faculty and director of the writing center, Bryan College of Health Sciences.

Lew Kaye-Skinner, PhD; Effective Teaching Strategies; Faculty Focus; October 30, 2014; http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/using-attendance-questions-build-community-enhance-teaching/]; December 1, 2014.

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bibliographies replete with dubious sources that were clearly not scrutinized. They had been able to replicate a skill perfectly, but had never really comprehended or found value in it. In the parlance of Ken Bain, they are likely "strategic learners" who can mimic a technique, but who "understand little of the ideas behind [a concept] because they never intend to do so."

I've long issued a question-based protocol for students to apply to historical texts. I routinely have classes do comparative analyses of primary and secondary sources, in which the provenance and authority of the texts matter, and I can easily imagine devising additional exercises that would reinforce the necessity of sourcing. Readers will undoubtedly weigh in with tips on how to address the problems I describe, and I'll consider them seriously.

But, as much as I hate to say it, I wonder if much of these efforts will be in vain. Wineburg demonstrates that historians not only source their documents automatically, but read them in a manner their students do not – a fact more broadly applicable to the divergent ways experts and non-experts organize knowledge, as illustrated by Susan Ambrose.

Daniel Willingham, a renowned cognitive psychologist, writes that genuine proficiency in a subject area is partly a function of what's called the "ten-year rule": expertise can develop (if it develops at all) only after roughly a decade of specialized and intensive training. If true, this helps explain why we academics internalized the sourcing heuristic probably sometime in graduate school or in our early careers. But the ten-year rule might equally explain why the process fails to have a meaningful and lasting impact on most undergraduates.

For my part, I'll keep trying, because what other choice is there? And I'll dream of the day when I ask my students to take out that new book and they all instinctively flip it over to the back.

Dr. Pete Burkholder is an associate professor of history at Fairleigh Dickinson University, where he is also founding chair of the faculty teaching development committee.

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Pete Burkholder, PhD; Teaching and Learning; Why Your Read Like an Expert - and Why Your Students Probably Don't: Faculty Focus; November 17, 2014; [http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/read-like-expert-students-probably-dont/]; December 1, 2014.