

## **Making Thinking Explicit: Decoding History Teaching**

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**W**hat does a student have to do to succeed in a twenty-first century history course? This seemingly simple question in fact poses quite difficult issues that range from the nature of historical inquiry to the organization of the modern university. Historians, like other experts, generally operate within frameworks that are specific to their discipline and transparent to experts in the field. Until fully conscious of the steps required for success in their courses, their students will frequently encounter learning bottlenecks that may bring learning to a halt.

### **I. Defining What Students Need to Be Able to Do to Succeed in a History Course**

In an effort to overcome such obstacles to learning, the three history professors and educational developer at Indiana University writing here have worked with other members of IU's history department to expose and explain the kinds of thinking required in upper level history courses and to develop and assess new techniques for making explicit the specific steps that students must take to succeed. This process is based on the "Decoding the Disciplines" model that carries faculty from the identification of crucial bottlenecks, to learning, to the creation and assessment of specific teaching strategies designed to show students the steps that they will need to succeed at these tasks (Pace and Middendorf, 2004), and on the work of Sam Wineburg (Wineburg, 2001).

We began by interviewing seventeen faculty members from the history department, asking our subjects to identify bottlenecks to student learning in their upper level classes and to try to reconstruct the habits of thinking that enable them (as historians) to avoid such bottlenecks themselves. Through an initial content analysis of the interviews we identified seven predominant bottlenecks. (There are others we hope to deal with eventually.) Some of these have parallels to problems encountered by students in other disciplines (Donald, 2002); others are specific to history. But each must be negotiated for success in at least some history classes. (Brief quotations from the interviews with faculty accompany the descriptions of the bottlenecks below.)



### **Bottleneck 1: Misunderstanding the role of facts**

Students often fail to recognize that history is not about accumulating facts but rather, about interpreting sources to explain and seek answers to problems in the past.

"Certainly, there are facts that we can't dispute we know that this person was president at this time, that this battle took place on this date but to many of [the students] that's what history is. It's about dates and the chronology.... And once you start complicating the dates and the timeline with real people, the fact that there are questions about how things unfolded, it becomes much more complicated."

### **Bottleneck 2: Interpreting primary sources**

This is the main methodological task in history, and thus, subject specific. It is actually a cluster of bottlenecks, and different types of primary sources (art, modes of producing goods, policies, etc.) require students to pose both questions common to all and distinctive to each about the nature, the origin, and the intended audience for the source.

"I give [the students] two maps [and ask] how are they different? Why would someone set it up this way? And that's a big question for them, because they don't think about the notion of choice..."

### **Bottleneck 3: Maintaining appropriate emotional distance**

Many of the issues dealt with in history classes are emotionally charged, and yet, complete detachment from the events of the past is often inappropriate.

"For many of [the students] changing their understanding of history is complicated by the fact that they believe that if they do this, they are somehow being disrespectful to their own families, their own histories, their own sense of identity, of who they are. And I think that this is a really big problem, when we talk about the slipperiness of history, and the slipperiness of facts and the ambiguity of things like identity; it really is uncomfortable to them on personal level."

### **Bottleneck 4: Understanding the limits of knowledge of historical actors**

Students commonly impose hindsight onto historical actors, ignoring the difference between their own knowledge of subsequent events and the inability of the people that they study to know their future.

"[Students] have difficulty appreciating that historical actors didn't know what was going to be happening in the future. Particularly in this course dealing with the life of Jews in eastern Europe prior to WW II that life was fundamentally destroyed and decimated during WW II particularly during the interwar period, students have a problem with the variety and the richness of life that people there lived. They know what happened in the end and have trouble [realizing] that the actors did not know what happens at the end. ...If they read stories of people packing their bag eagerly to go to Auschwitz, because they think they are going to be resettled in Germany...[the

students] just can't conceive of that. They repeatedly ask questions in a variety of forms...they just don't understand that these people didn't know where they were going."

### **Bottleneck 5: Identifying with people in another time/place**

To understand the actions of individuals or groups in the past, students must use an understanding of human motivations based largely on their own experience, but they must also recognize that thought and action in earlier eras were conditioned by very different assumptions, perceptions, and experiences.

"[You have] to develop the ability to empathize and to imagine other people's motivations given a lack of complete information...to use your own experience as a person to imagine the things that aren't being said or the things that they don't understand about themselves..."

### **Bottleneck 6: Constructing and evaluating arguments**

Like many bottlenecks, this one is composed of many subsidiary bottlenecks, but the main question is, how do arguments "spring" from the evidence? And how does an argument posed by one author measure up in light of others about the same historical issue?

"History or the past is not something that is simply tangible and out there and something that can be recaptured in its entirety, the facts,' but what historians do to interpret it. And these interpretations change over time...Both getting students to understand the process of changing historical interpretations, and...once they recognize there are arguments, to not suddenly slide into the opposite theme of it's the facts or it's all interpreted, it's all equal....The backbone of the discipline is, What kind of argument about change over time are you making?"

### **Bottleneck 7: Linking specific details to a broader context**

This bottleneck arises from the difficulty students have tying the specific details of a primary source into the broader historical context (the issues or themes) of the course. For instance, when a student reads a medieval document donating property to the church, the student may have difficulty seeing how the witness list, for example, may shed light on medieval families or how the narrative of how the gift came to be given may illustrate medieval social relationships.



"One of the challenges that I find is to get students to think of autobiographical or text or memoir as a historical document and to be able to read into it larger trends or to take [evidence of them] from it and to associate the individual's experiences with larger trends."

All the historians with whom we worked found it quite easy to describe student bottlenecks. But, despite the fact that this set of historians demonstrated great commitment to and

sophistication about teaching their subject, they generally found it was quite difficult to make explicit the operations needed to overcome the bottlenecks. They had to dissect disciplinary thinking that had become innate, so "obvious," that they were unaware of its existence. There was a natural tendency for them to repeat the terminology normally used by historians, rather than to define the set of operations necessary to accomplish a particular task. In short, they tended to deal with global concepts, rather than narrowly defined operations.

Thus, we found ourselves returning over and over to variations of two closely related questions: "How would a student go about doing this task?" and "How would you do this?"

Q: What do you do when you look at [the historical object]?

Professor: For a scholar with a historical source, we want to know who created it, when, why they created it, what the context was when they created it....And it's very important to convince students that these [objects] were created....Primary source documents don't just drop from the sky.

Q: How do you approach a source to understand its creator? Etc.

From the rich material in the interviews and by breaking down our own thinking, we were able to construct rough flow charts that outline the sequence of operations required for success in overcoming specific bottlenecks. These, in turn, have served as the starting place for the newest phase of the History Learning Project the development of teaching modules.

## **II. Modeling and Assessing the Operations Students Need in These Courses**

The current project is the beginning of a transformation of the teaching culture of the History Department. Faculty members have chosen specific bottlenecks in eleven courses and are designing teaching modules to lead students through them, following Steps three through six of "Decoding the Disciplines" (see inset, right).

The teaching modules that result from Steps three to six will be adaptable to other content areas in history and to other disciplines related to history. The steps make it easy and natural to share results. More informally, several faculty members found the interview process so inspiring that they immediately began redesigning their course materials.

In all, 24 out of 53 of the history faculty participated in the interviews or the module design, but the department as a whole will be working with the results. Thirty-six faculty members and graduate students attended a presentation to learn the results of the interviews, watching video footage of key sections in which faculty described the bottlenecks. Additionally, 22 faculty who teach the capstone courses participated in a two-hour discussion sharing strategies they have found useful. One of us (Pace) showed an undergraduate history seminar some of the material, and students were fascinated to see faculty members articulating what they were expecting students to be able to do, something which no one had previously done for these students. In the summer of 2007 faculty will present their teaching modules along with assessments of their efficacy, and the department will determine where in the curriculum these key learning exercises will be used.

However, making our findings public outside the department is key to bringing change to the discipline as a whole. We have presented our findings at conferences already, but we also hope to create videos that will help define the operations needed in college history classes for distribution to secondary school teachers, and that will help faculty in other fields decode their own disciplines, although we also anticipate less structured uses for these videos. Thus, the project is simultaneously involving faculty more seriously in teaching, providing them with concrete strategies for generating the deep learning that students will need for the twenty-first century.

#### References:

- ◆ Donald, J.G. 2002. *Learning to Think*. San Francisco, CA.: Jossey-Bass.
- ◆ Pace, D., and J. Middendorf, eds. 2004. *Decoding the Disciplines: Helping Students Learn Disciplinary Ways of Thinking*. (New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 98) San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- ◆ Wineburg, S. 2001. *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past*. Philadelphia, PA.: Temple University Press.

#### **Decoding the Disciplines Model**

Step 1 – What is the bottleneck to learning in this class?

Step 2 – How does an expert do these things?

Step 3 – How can these tasks be explicitly modeled?

Step 4 – How will students practice these skills and get feedback?

Step 5 – What will motivate the students?

Step 6 – How well are students mastering these learning tasks?

Step 7 – How can the resulting knowledge about learning be shared?

Middendorf, J. and D. Pace. 2004. "Decoding the Disciplines: A Model for Helping Students Learn Disciplinary Ways of Thinking." In D. Pace and J. Middendorf, eds., *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 98, 1-12.