



Synthesis ⇔ Creating Historic Accounts

The BHH Five Processes

Primary source is a term sometimes used in history to describe a piece of evidence about the past. *Secondary source* is a term sometimes used to describe an historic account. The trouble with these terms is that their application depends on the use of a particular text rather than on the nature of the text itself. For example, a textbook passage about African American history that was written in the 1940's might be used as a secondary source if someone naively read it to learn about African American history. If, on the other hand, someone read this same account as part of their research into how African American history accounts have changed since the 1920's, a 1940's textbook would serve as a primary source about historians' ideas in that decade.

For the sake of clarity in communication, the terms “evidence” and “account” seem better suited than “primary and secondary sources” to describe resources for studying history. When we conduct a history exploration with integrity, we explore both original evidence from the time in question, and accounts that have been written about those events by other people who themselves explored pieces of evidence, and themselves read other accounts.

If we think of the creation and encounter of texts as conversations between people, it seems that history is by nature an act of community across time and space. To touch the past, we question shards of life that were once created and somehow preserved. Some shards are records that were created intentionally, some are simply relics, by-products that were never intended to tell us anything of the moment in which they were originally created.ⁱ But they all have in common their human origins and so, too, do the accounts that they inform.

Too often, this very human, evidence-based and interpretive history is nowhere to be found in U.S. K-16 classrooms. Instead, students are assigned to read history textbook passages that are written as though they were dictated by an omniscient being with a front row seat on every moment in every place in the past. To add insult to injury, students are then expected to determine which elements in this omniscient inventory of time are more significant (and therefore likely to appear on a test) than others. This approach to teaching history has consequences that range from boring and turning students off, to squandering an opportunity to develop student media literacy and historical thinking skills.

When we introduce students to evidence and accounts as humanly constructed texts, we have the chance to help them learn how to identify perspective and how to evaluate its effect on the questions we can ask of evidence. We have chances to help students develop a sophisticated understanding of the nature of accounts, and develop reflexive analytic skills. To make the most of these chances, it helps to have some awareness of both the misconceptions and good ideas that students may bring to our history classrooms.ⁱⁱ For that, we are fortunate that researchers have designed and conducted some excellent studies on how students think about history.



British researchers have led the way in much of this work. Their CHATA studies in the 1990's identified the following student ideas about the nature of historic accounts:

1. *Past as given.* In this conception, students haven't given thought to the origins of history accounts. History stories are just out there. They just are. Concepts of author perspectives, evidence, questions asked...none of these elements are on the student's radar.
2. *Past as inaccessible.* We weren't there so we can't know. If there are differences in accounts, it's because there's no direct access to the past. Students aren't aware that differences in accounts arise from the differences in the sorts of questions the writer asked and in the varying perspectives of the writer.
3. *Past as determining stories.* The stories we write about the past are fixed by available information. Differences in accounts are because different writers found different pieces of evidence, not because they asked different questions or interpreted the available evidence differently.
4. *Past as reported by biased author.* In this idea, students shift their focus to the author as an active contributor. They attribute differences in accounts to the authors' agendas, and assume differences can always be attributed to author distortion or bias.
5. *Past as selected and organized from a viewpoint.* Students assume that an author holds a legitimate position, not simply a biased agenda. But they attribute differences in this position to the authors consulting different evidence.
6. *Past as re-constructed by investigating using certain criteria.* Students understand that it is the nature of accounts to differ, depending on the questions investigated, rather than the nature of historians to bias accounts.ⁱⁱⁱ

Other studies have found that students often don't know that accounts are based on evidence such as laws, government reports, business records, personal records such as diaries and letters, photos and other visual records, music, etc.^{iv}

If, as history teachers, we believe it's important for our students to understand that history accounts "...are not so much copies of the past as ways of looking at it"^v, then we need to systematically engage them in activities that help them learn this. Lead BHH mentor Kim Heckart's [Predict and Infer](#) model is an excellent starting place for this endeavor. Simple and powerful, it helps students' learn to *recognize the connection between evidence and accounts*.

To help students recognize that *accounts can differ because authors ask different questions of evidence*, gather a set of evidence related to a topic your class is exploring. The sources should inform at least two broad categories of questions such as economic, social and political. To begin the activity, provide one half of your class with one category of question to answer (economic, for example), and provide the other half with another (social, for example). Don't tell the two sides about the differences in the provided questions. When the students shares their accounts,



ask your students why the accounts turned out differently, even though the sources were the same. Your discussion can then focus on helping your students think intentionally about the nature of historic accounts.

As you engage your students in pulling together the elements of their history study to create their own accounts, you will reinforce the connection between evidence and accounts by teaching your students to cite the sources they studied. The [BHH citation icons](#) give students a fun visual format with which to cite their sources.

Finally, don't feel constrained to pencil and paper accounts. You may ask your students to design a mind map account in which they represent the elements of a history topic using symbolic pictures. Comic books, paintings, poems, and newspapers are all formats that may intrigue your students and spark their interest by engaging their creativity. By giving your students some choice over the format in which they may create their historic account, you draw on the power of metacognition. So encourage alternative account formats, but always provide criteria for both content and processes. This will scaffold your students' success in defining a topic, consulting and interpreting sources, and then representing the understanding that grows from a rich exploration.

Sources Cited

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ⁱⁱ Donovan, M.S. & Bransford, J. (2005). *How students learn: History, mathematics, and science in the classroom*, eds. Donovan, S. & Bransford, J., Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lee, P.J. (2005). Putting principles into practice: Understanding history. In *How students learn: History, mathematics, and science in the classroom*, eds. Donovan, S. & Bransford, J., Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, p.42.

^{iv} Barton, K. (1997). "I just kinda know": Elementary students' ideas about historical evidence. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, v.25, n.4, pp. 407-430.

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^v Lee, P.J. (2005). Putting principles into practice: Understanding history. In *How students learn: History, mathematics, and science in the classroom*, eds. Donovan, S. & Bransford, J., Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, p.60.