

## Surfing the Net

# Teaching Historical Analysis And Thinking Using the Internet

C. Frederick Risinger

**In 1962, I began my first year** of teaching history and social studies in the Chicago suburban area. I had five classes of world history. When I walked into my classroom, there were several stacks of textbooks. The primary text was *Across the Ages*, written by Louise Capen. Our copies were at least 9 to 12 years old. (Illinois is one of the states that does not have statewide textbook adoption; there was no requirement at that time to regularly replace textbooks.) I took the book home and browsed through it, when I noticed an interesting point. In discussing early humans, it included a lengthy description of Piltdown Man. You may have heard of the Piltdown Man Hoax. In 1912, Piltdown Man was considered the “missing link” between apes and humans. A fragment of an orangutan jawbone and a human skull were found in a gravel pit in the small village of Piltdown, England. Before the finding was exposed as fraud in 1953, it led scientists down a blind alley, was used by Clarence Darrow as evidence in the Scopes Trial, and was even included as a major ancestor of humans in L. Ron Hubbard’s book on Scientology. (Unfortunately for L. Ron, the fraud came to light just a few months after the book’s publication.)

There were more recent textbooks in my classroom in which Piltdown Man was discredited as a hoax. An idea hit me ... and my first lesson plan for historical thinking was created. I gave half of my students copies of *Across the Ages* and the other half copies of the more recent books. On the second day of classes, I asked the students to find the section on Piltdown Man in the index, read it, and write a paragraph about him.

Next, I asked several *Across the Ages* students to read their paragraphs. Students with the newer texts looked at each other quizzically. Then, I asked several of the students with newer textbooks to read their paragraphs. This time, the *Across the Ages* students were confused. I then told them that the

Piltdown Man hoax had been discovered in 1953, and I asked the students to check their books’ publication date. Finally, I asked the students why I had used that lesson. After some discussion, the students understood the message of seeking multiple sources of historical information and checking the publication dates on books. The lesson worked. Even after we bought new textbooks, I kept 15 to 20 *Across the Ages* books and used that same lesson for several more years. A few years later, a graduating valedictorian mentioned that lesson as an important event in her life. She later was elected to the Georgia legislature.

In 2001, Samuel Wineburg published his book *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*. It made an immediate

impact on the way the study of history is viewed by historians, history professors, social studies methods instructors, and, hopefully, history teaching in the schools. Groups such as the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians adopted the concept, held conferences for classroom teachers, and published lesson plans that incorporate aspects of historical thinking. Fred Drake and his colleagues at Illinois State University received grants to provide professional development workshops on Wineburg’s philosophy.

Today, historical thinking and historical analysis are significant themes within the ranks of social studies educators. While looking through the NCSS annual conference *Preview*, I counted more than a dozen sessions or workshops related to these concepts.

I’ve received a lot of e-mail regarding my recent “Aligning Elections” column. So, I thought another “concept-based” column might be in order. An article, “Revisiting the Idea of Progress in History,” by Wilfred McClay in the September/October issue of *Historically Speaking: The Bulletin of the Historical Society*, emphasized the importance of historical analysis and historical thinking. This column is based on these twin concepts. I’ve selected websites that both explain the concepts and also provide lesson plans, activities, and other resources

for classroom teachers, supervisors, and social studies methods instructors. While I don't think that historical thinking and historical analysis are a cure-all for the criticism of history education in the schools, utilizing some of the ideas and resources found on these websites might help heighten student interest and appreciation.

### Historical Thinking (On Google Book Search)

[books.google.com/books?id=2M9Q22lxS8C&dq=%22historical+thinking%22+teaching](https://books.google.com/books?id=2M9Q22lxS8C&dq=%22historical+thinking%22+teaching)  
This ridiculously-long URL can be found more easily by typing "Historical Thinking" into Google; "Book Search" will appear as one of the options. Just below the Google logo, you will see "Web" and "Books." Click on "Books" and scroll down until you find the site with Samuel S. Wineburg's name. Click on "Table of Contents" and you will see "Case Studies" beginning on page 89. There is a page limit on how many pages you can read at any one time. However,

this will give you a good idea of the concept behind the book. Go to Chapter 4, "Reading Abraham Lincoln," and read Lincoln's statement about racial equality for a better idea of why Wineburg thinks it should be used in history classes. This will give you a good idea of Wineburg's views.

### Wikipedia: Historical Thinking

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical\\_thinking](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_thinking)  
Again, I have a few qualms about recommending Wikipedia because the information can be "edited" by anyone who signs up to do so. However, this is a very good and comprehensive article on historical thinking and historiography. Within the article are links to The National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA, with its outstanding teacher resources. It includes a five-part definition of historical thinking: (1) Chronological Comprehension; (2) Historical Comprehension; (3) Historical Analysis and Interpretation; (4) Historical Research Capabilities;

and (5) Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making. It has other links to good resources for teachers and methods teachers.

### Historical Thinking Matters

[historicalthinkingmatters.org/teachers/](http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/teachers/)  
This is a great new organization that is co-directed by Sam Wineburg at Stanford and Roy Rosenzweig of George Mason University. The first two sentences on the "About Us" page echo Wineburg's belief that "Historical thinking matters." Not only does it matter, it needs to be learned. Teachers can download four investigations, or lesson plans on the Spanish-American War, the Scopes Trial, Social Security, and Rosa Parks. Each unit has all teacher and student materials, a downloadable film clip explaining and demonstrating the teaching methods, the skill and content standards from California, Texas, and five other states, detailed step-by-step instructional strategies and assessment recommendations. This site is a must

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for learning about historical thinking and analysis.

### National Center for History in the Schools

[nchs.ucla.edu/standards/thinking5-12.html](http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards/thinking5-12.html)  
This is the website cited in the Wikipedia article above. It has a comprehensive array of information and resources and is one of the more valuable websites included in this column. It includes grades K-4 and 5-12 national standards for both U.S. and world history with specific statements about what students should be able to do to demonstrate proficiency on a particular standard. It also has links to teaching units in both world and U.S. history. The packets are for sale, but the excellent previews of each are sufficient to give teachers some excellent ideas for their own curriculum development.

### Teaching American History Grant

[www.history.ilstu.edu/tahg/guide.html](http://www.history.ilstu.edu/tahg/guide.html)  
Fred Drake, Laurence McBride, and Michael Gardner at Illinois State University received a Teaching American History Grant and conducted professional development training for Illinois teachers on historical thinking and Wineburg's book. One valuable part of this project's resources is a linkage between historical thinking, "History's Habits of the Mind," and the 10 NCSS thematic standards. An excellent list of websites includes links to all types of original sources such as population data and links to U.S. and international history departments. Although the site was last updated in 2003, it is still a comprehensive resource on historical thinking and analysis.

### Discovery Education: Kathy Schrock's Guide for Educators

[school.discoveryeducation.com/schrockguide/history/histg.html](http://school.discoveryeducation.com/schrockguide/history/histg.html)  
I've recommended Kathy Schrock's website many times in these columns. Kathy certainly must be one of the busiest people in the world of education. She's still associated with the Nauset (Mass.) Public Schools, but has written several books on

website development and website evaluation. She now has an amazing teacher resource on the Discovery Network's education website. She covers all subject areas in the curriculum, but her history/social studies set of links is the most comprehensive and best I've seen. Most teachers can find websites that intrigue them, excite them about teaching, and provide a myriad of teacher resources. Since historical thinking and analysis depend on primary resources, good lesson plans, and documents, this site is a great place to go. Be sure to check out the first one on her list—"Ad\* Access"—it includes images of more than 7,000 advertisements from U.S. and Canadian newspapers and magazines printed between 1911 and 1955. Students can learn a lot about twentieth-century American society by studying these advertisements. This is only one of dozens of excellent sites on Kathy's list.

### Teaching Historical Thinking

[www.ericdigests.org/2003-2/historical.html](http://www.ericdigests.org/2003-2/historical.html)  
This is a full-text version of an ERIC digest written by Fred Drake of Illinois State University. In it, he elaborates on Wineburg's views, especially the idea that thinking historically is different than thinking about other subject areas. One helpful part of the abstract is his discussion of applying historical thinking to reading and interpreting documents. He recommends a five-task reading guide that can be applied to any primary or secondary document.

### American Historical Association Blog

[blog.historians.org/resources/351/a-plethora-of-lesson-plans-at-a-plethora-of-lesson-plans-at-edsitement](http://blog.historians.org/resources/351/a-plethora-of-lesson-plans-at-a-plethora-of-lesson-plans-at-edsitement)

The American Historical Association has a blog that is updated two to three times a week. The URL above takes you to the October 17, 2007, page which promotes and provides a link to Edsitement, the outstanding website run by the National Endowment for the Humanities. I've recommended this site several times because of the outstanding lesson plans, which are available free. Nearly all of them



incorporate the principles of historical thinking and analysis. Many of them involve using primary sources and conflicting contemporary accounts of the same historical event. You can go directly to the Edsitement website ([edsitement.neh.gov/tab\\_lesson.asp?subjectArea=3](http://edsitement.neh.gov/tab_lesson.asp?subjectArea=3)) to get to the lessons, but I think that all history teachers should have the AHA's blog link on their bookmarks. There are notices about upcoming workshops for classroom teachers, descriptions of new resources (such as the new school services provided by the Illinois State Archives; and you can read the *American Historical Review* online, for free).

Sometimes, I get angry, or a bit depressed, when I hear about how history and social studies are being marginalized in the curriculum because of No Child Left Behind—with its over-emphasis on reading and math and standardized testing. But the times are changing, I think. More and more Americans are realizing how understanding and analyzing the past may help us to do a better job of making decisions about the present and future. The thoughtfulness and energy behind the historical thinking and analysis trend in K-12 history and social studies is laudable and welcome. 📖

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