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Learning to Teach Argumentative Historical Writing by Analyzing Student Work

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Abstract

In this paper, we report on our own modest professional development efforts that accompanied a U.S. history curriculum intervention project for 8th graders. We identify one specific student-learning goal located at the intersection of historical thinking and literacy: the disciplinary use of evidence in writing historical argument. In recognition of the challenges associated with such a goal, we created a one-year professional development experience to support teachers’ understanding of the intended outcomes and facility with the curriculum. The professional development course aimed to develop teachers’ conceptual understandings of history, historical thinking and writing, and student learning. We offered opportunities to analyze students’ essays and to practice specific strategies that promote historical thinking and writing. We share what teachers noticed in their students’ writing over the course of one year, including their increased attention to features of historical thinking and writing, to the quality of students’ work, and identification of students’ needs. Teachers had more difficulty engaging with students’ evaluations of evidence and clarifying next steps they could take to support students’ learning. We use these analyses to reflect on teachers’ understandings and consider how we might best prepare teachers to teach historical thinking and writing in the future.
Learning to Teach Argumentative Historical Writing by Analyzing Student Work

In the past thirty years, researchers and educators have laid the groundwork for an emphasis on historical thinking in history classrooms (e.g., Bain, 2005; Lee & Dickinson, 1984; Seixas, 2009; Wineburg, 1991). This emphasis on disciplinary thinking has become embedded within efforts to develop students’ reading and writing skills as a key pathway towards developing adolescent literacy (cf. Moje, 2008). In the U.S., the Common Core State Standards have been adopted by most states and integrate historical ways of thinking with literacy goals. Contrary to popular thought, research has demonstrated that such goals are attainable for a wide range of students, including students as young as 5th grade (VanSledright, 2002), students with disabilities (De La Paz, 2005; MacArthur, Ferretti, & Okolo, 2001) and English learners (Zwiers, 2006).

But such goals are not easy to attain. Students do not naturally tend to think like historians (Wineburg, 1991). In reading historical texts, they often focus on the literal meaning of documents and miss intertextual reading strategies that would promote interpretive work (Afflerbach & VanSledright, 2001; Stahl, Hynd, Britton, McNish, & Bosquet, 1996). Nor do students tend to write as historians do; in one study, students tended to list and arrange facts rather than analyze information (Greene, 2001). Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the U.S. highlight additional challenges. Only 2% of the adolescents tested in writing could claim a position and consistently support it with well-chosen reasons and examples, or extend the main idea in an essay (NCES, 2003). The 2005 RAND Report also highlights the low proficiency rates in NAEP writing results, and notes the wide disparity among
socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups (McCombs, Kirby, Barney, Darilek, & Magee, 2005). The majority of adolescents tested in the U.S. may be able to read and comprehend the literal meaning of documents or claim a position in writing, but they are unable to consistently support arguments with evidence. Yet, with instruction that emphasizes historical thinking and argument students’ writing can improve (De La Paz & Felton 2010; Monte-Sano, 2008; 2011).

Despite the energy focused on historical thinking and writing in the research community, many teachers are not necessarily prepared to teach these aspects of the discipline. Large-scale analysis confirms that when teachers in the U.S. assign reading and writing in history classrooms, the focus typically involves basic reading comprehension and summary of information (Kiuhara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009), and the use of textbooks as authoritative sources of information (Bain, 2006). When as many as 53.9% of history teachers in the U.S. do not have even a minor in the discipline (Ravitch, 2000), this lack of attention to disciplinary thinking and writing is hardly surprising. As a consequence, efforts to influence the teaching and learning of history must give teachers opportunities to understand historical thinking and related literacies as well as learn how to teach toward such goals.

Certainly, professional development efforts exist in history education, but we know little about their impact as of yet. Teaching American History grants from the U.S. Department of Education have tried to bolster teachers’ disciplinary preparation, but few evaluative studies exist (see Kortecamp & Steeves, 2006 and De La Paz, Malkus, Monte-Sano, & Montenaro, 2011 for exceptions). And since the goals and learning opportunities vary by grant recipient, it’s difficult to glean any overarching approach that is successful. The Historical Thinking Project in Canada (Seixas, 2009) is a large-scale, coherent effort to develop six facets of students’ historical thinking. Leaders recognized the importance of professional development to the success of this
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project from early on; yet, reports of these efforts are still forthcoming (see http://historicalthinking.ca/). Given the emphasis on thinking and literacy in history education and the fact that many teachers are unprepared to address these goals, it’s time to figure out what kinds of professional development will build teachers’ capacity to teach for historical thinking and related literacies.

In this paper, we report on our own modest professional development efforts that accompanied a curriculum intervention project for 8th graders in the 17th-largest school district in the U.S. We identify one specific student-learning goal located at the intersection of historical thinking and literacy: the disciplinary use of evidence in writing historical argument. In recognition of the challenges associated with such a goal, we developed an intervention for students and their teachers. We designed a one-year curriculum consisting of six, three-day investigations along with instructional tools to support students’ historical thinking, reading, and writing. Alongside the curriculum we created a one-year professional development experience to support teachers’ understanding of the intended outcomes and facility with the curriculum. Here, we share what teachers noticed in their students’ writing when given this opportunity to learn to teach historical thinking and writing, as well as the opportunity to reflect on student work during our professional development sessions. We use these analyses to reflect on teachers’ understandings and consider how we might best prepare teachers to teach historical thinking and writing in the future.

Theoretical Background

Learning to Teach Historical Thinking and Writing

In learning to teach history, researchers have found that teachers’ disciplinary knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and beliefs about students are important influences on novices’
teaching (Conklin, 2008; Monte-Sano, 2011a; Wilson & Wineburg, 1988). Bohan and Davis (1998) examined three preservice teachers’ written construction of an historical event based on multiple sources as well as their historical thinking about those sources. They found a lack of understanding of historical thinking and the inquiry process as well as limited use of evidence to support claims in their written work. Monte-Sano and Harris (in press) found that even in a preservice program focused on teaching historical thinking, candidates may emphasize basic summary writing especially given weak disciplinary knowledge combined with the pressures of standardized testing and school-based initiatives. Teachers’ approach to history can become more reflective of the interpretive aspects of the discipline over time as novices learn to integrate this approach into their school settings. Little research has been done on veteran history teachers’ learning through inservice programs. A notable exception, Seixas (1999) found that experienced teachers and historians in professional development summer institutes had entirely different language to talk about history and this language typically divorced content from pedagogy. Such talk separated process and skills from content, something that a disciplinary literacy approach to history instruction seeks to integrate. Research in history education indicates the challenges to preparing teachers for cultivating their students’ historical thinking and writing, yet leaves us with many gaps in this area.

**Preservice Teacher Education**

The research that has been most helpful to us in thinking about teacher learning comes from outside of history education. In research conducted under the auspices of the Center on English Learning and Achievement (CELA), Grossman and her colleagues (1999; 2000) use activity theory to frame learning to teach English as a process of appropriating pedagogical tools for teaching English. They consider two kinds of pedagogical tools: conceptual tools and
practical tools. Conceptual tools are “principles, frameworks, and ideas about teaching, learning, and English/language arts that teachers use as heuristics to guide their instructional decisions” (p. 633-634; Grossman, Valencia, Evans, Thompson, Martin, & Place, 2000). Practical tools include strategies, practices, or resources used in teaching that “have more local and immediate utility” (p. 14, Grossman, Smagorinsky, Valencia, 1999). The process of appropriation shows the extent to which teachers appropriately use practical tools they’ve been exposed to. In using practical tools, teachers theoretically internalize the ways of thinking that support the effective use of such tools (15, Grossman et al., 1999).

This work has been extended more recently as teacher educators have defined specific high-leverage teaching practices (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Lampert, 2010) or “pedagogies of enactment” (Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009). Instead of framing teacher education around the knowledge that teachers are to learn, these leaders in the field have focused on knowledge in practice or enacted knowledge. It’s not just what a teacher knows that’s important, but what a teacher does in the classroom. This work defines specific practical tools that are most useful for new teachers and defines the role of teacher education as helping students understand and master those practices.

How then, do teachers learn to use practical tools in their classroom to support students’ learning? Teacher educators who emphasize teacher learning of specific pedagogies or practices advocate a practice focused curriculum to help novice teachers appropriate practical tools and implement high-leverage practices (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman et al., 2009; Lampert, 2010). A practice focused curriculum orients teacher education around skill in enacting specific pedagogical tools or strategies, but also embraces the importance of developing teachers’ conceptual understandings of these practices. Grossman et al.’s (2009) work on cross-
professional perspectives outlines specific aspects of teaching pedagogies of practice in professional education: representations, decompositions, and approximations. In preparing teachers, representations of practice involve using examples of expert teaching practice and making hidden components that contribute to expert enactment visible. Decompositions of practice involve identifying the components that are integral to particular practices so that novices can see and enact them. Approximations of practice include simulations of different aspects of practice so that novices can rehearse, gather feedback, reflect, and continue to develop their practice.

**Teacher Professional Development**

Research on professional development and veteran teachers’ learning is limited, but provides additional ideas for shaping effective professional development programs. Over ten years ago, Wilson and Berne (1999) argued that relatively little is known about teachers’ learning, save that they are able to continue learning about their subject matter, how to teach it, and how to support students’ disciplinary thinking. Calls to reform professional development efforts from the late 1990s (e.g., Ball & Cohen, 1999; Hawley & Valli, 1999) are replete with recommendations for systemic, comprehensive overhauls in the ways teachers engage in deep reflection about student learning and the content that they teach. Wilson (2009) recently led a National Academy of Education committee to investigate what we know about fostering teacher quality. According to Wilson and her colleagues, PD has been found to be effective when it enhances teachers’ subject matter knowledge, provides extended learning time, actively engages teachers, involves teams of teachers from the same schools, and links to what teachers are asked to do.
One promising way of linking professional development to teachers’ work and actively engaging teachers in PD is to analyze student work. Ball and Cohen speak (1999) of the need for teachers to learn “in and from practice” and for teachers to use such knowledge to improve their practice. They share examples, including giving teachers opportunities to learn to interpret meanings in student work samples. What would analysis of student work entail? Judith Warren Little (2004) looked across professional development efforts to highlight the different purposes for student work analysis: deepening teacher knowledge, increasing external control of teacher education, and generating community and commitment to reform among teachers. Our own work fits within the first purpose, deepening student knowledge, with the belief that teachers are better prepared to help students when they understand student learning, pedagogical content knowledge, and subject matter knowledge. Little reports that while there is some evidence that teaching and learning improve when teachers analyze student work in professional development, this evidence is limited to a handful of studies and these studies do not capture the range of practices used for student work analysis in PD. Further, Little contends that, “few studies do much to illuminate the actual practices of teachers engaged in that activity” (104).

Wilson and Berne (1999) share examples of successful professional development that provide teachers with opportunities to talk about students’ thinking. One such example is the mathematics education research on Cognitively Guided Instruction (CGI). Kazemi and Franke (2004) discuss one aspect of the CGI work in which teachers met monthly to discuss their students’ work in response to the same mathematical problem. The researchers recorded these conversations and looked for changing patterns in discourse to understand teachers’ learning. They found two important shifts over the course of a year: first, teachers learned to attend to students’ thinking; second, teachers learned to develop instructional steps in response to their
students’ thinking. The use of student work in response to common problems and teachers oral participation in discussion contributed to teachers’ learning. In another study, van Es and Sherin (2008) explore elementary teachers’ “learning to notice” their students’ mathematical thinking in the context of a video club. Participating teachers were in their third year of implementing reform-based mathematics curriculum. During video club meetings, teachers analyzed videos of their instruction and facilitators helped teachers notice and analyze students’ mathematical thinking. They found that teachers’ analysis of videos shifted over the course of a year to include more attention to students’ mathematical thinking, more interpretive comments, and greater specificity in their comments. Although studies are limited, those that exist demonstrate the promise of student work analysis for increasing teachers’ focus on students’ thinking and developing teachers’ capacity to work with students on their ideas.

Although learning to teach historical literacy involves many considerations, here we emphasize teachers’ analysis of student writing during professional development meetings that coincided with a curriculum intervention focused on developing students’ disciplinary use of evidence in writing historical arguments. We look at teachers’ analysis of student essays at four points in the year to identify patterns in their attention to students’ disciplinary use of evidence in writing historical arguments. We believe this student learning outcome integrates historical thinking with argumentative writing (e.g., Monte-Sano, 2010) and refer to this outcome as argumentative historical writing, historical literacy, and historical thinking and writing—all terms which indicate that ways of thinking historically can be found in students’ writing. In our analyses we look for evidence of teachers’ learning with regard to the conceptual understanding and pedagogical approaches that are the foundation for teaching the disciplinary use of evidence in writing historical arguments. We ask two questions: (1) What do teachers notice in their
students’ argumentative historical essays? (2) Is there evidence of growth in what teachers notice in their students’ argumentative historical essays? (3) What do teachers’ reflections on students’ essays tell us about their knowledge of historical thinking and writing as well as student learning? (4) To what extent does what teachers notice reflect the type of analysis assignment given to them during professional development?

Method

The Intervention

Participants and context. We have been fortunate to work with a large school district surrounding a major city in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Our project aligned well with the district’s emphasis on disciplinary literacy in social studies and therefore the district welcomed us to work with their 8th-grade U.S. history teachers and students. The district’s disciplinary literacy initiative focused on 9th-grade social studies teachers at the start of our project and transitioned to 8th-grade teacher leaders in the last two years of the project. We have been careful to work with teachers who have not been involved in the district’s disciplinary literacy initiative thus far. We have implemented this one-year intervention twice and are now in our third and final year of implementation. Each year has included a different cohort of teachers and students. We refine our intervention each year based on the successes and challenges identified in the previous year. Here, we report on the second year of the project.

We invited social studies teachers at these target schools to join our project and teachers had the choice to participate or decline. Twenty teachers worked with us in some capacity. Five teachers did not implement the curriculum and instead administered pre- and posttests to their students to provide data for comparison purposes. Fifteen teachers implemented the curriculum and participated full-time in the professional development course. In this paper, we focus on
fourteen of the fifteen teachers who participated in our curriculum and professional development intervention. One teacher did not have a complete set of data (i.e., she was missing 3 of 4 notebook entries focused on her students’ work); therefore, we did not include her in our analyses. Intervention and control teachers worked at schools the district identified as having between 15 and 30% of the student population who were significantly below grade level in reading, although many of the individual student participants were proficient or advanced readers.

The district serves a socially and ethnically diverse group of students. Demographic and socioeconomic data indicate that fully 45% of the students receive free and reduced meals service, and 8.5% receive English services for speakers of other languages. Students are primarily African-American (76%) or Hispanic (15%), and the school system reports having relatively fewer Caucasian (6%), Asian (3%) and Native American (0.5%) students. Student participants are eighth grade students. According to state-wide assessments, the students have adequate decoding skills but poor comprehension. Data from the 2007 state reading test indicates that only 54% of the eighth grade population is proficient in reading. This represents a reduction in the number of proficient readers that were reported at the fourth grade level (77%) presumably due at least in part to increased literacy demands for adolescents.

**The curriculum.** The curriculum we created includes six three-day investigations taught over the course of one academic year in 8th-grade U.S. history classes. Each investigation has a historical question as its centerpiece and two conflicting primary documents. Day one of each investigation involved reading and annotating the historical documents, using a mnemonic device as a guide (“IREAD”). IREAD was designed to support historical thinking while reading. On day two students deliberated about the documents and the question, using a Structured
Academic Controversy (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 1988) and graphic organizer as support structures. Day three involved planning and composing an essay using several writing supports: a text structure model (“How to Write Your Essay”) with sample transition phrases and sample essays as scaffolds, and a mnemonic that encapsulated the process of planning and composing. At different points in the first three investigations, teachers introduced what to do on each day using the various scaffolds we created. We asked teachers initially to model how to use these supports and give students practice in using these “disciplinary literacy tools.” In the last three investigations, we asked teachers to promote students’ independence with the supports built into the curriculum.

We recognize that there are risks in boiling complex processes into concrete tools for students’ use. For example, students and teachers may learn to follow discreet steps without gaining a foundational understanding (e.g., Westhoff, 2009). In addition, critics contend that strategy instruction can be misguided in efforts to teach disciplinary literacy (Snow & Moje, 2010). But given the serious basic literacy needs of the students, we opted for highly structured learning opportunities that have been effective in research with students with diverse learning profiles (e.g., De La Paz, 2005), and were careful to apply the process of strategy acquisition to meaningful learning of disciplinary reading and writing skills. We associate each tool with core teaching practices in history education that are necessary for teaching historical thinking and writing (e.g., Ball & Forzani, 2009). Yet, for most teachers these tools and the practices associated with them represent a departure from conventional social studies instruction. (e.g., Cuban, 1991).

**The professional development program.** In order to build teachers’ capacity to teach historical thinking and writing, we met together for 88 hours across eleven all-day professional
development sessions. Teachers earned six graduate credits for completing the yearlong course. We planned PD experiences to best support teachers’ learning of this new approach to teaching history using design principles found in literature on effective PD (Wilson, 2009; Desimone et al, 2010). In particular, our professional development program was sustained, used extended amounts of time, linked to teachers’ work with students in the classroom, actively engaged teachers, and gave them opportunities to enhance their knowledge of the discipline and strategies for teaching disciplinary literacy.

In the first four sessions of the course we aimed to develop teachers’ conceptual understanding of history as an evidence-based interpretive discipline, historical thinking and reading, deliberation, and the writing process. In each of these sessions we engaged teachers in activities that represented these aspects of history and highlighted the approach to history teaching embedded in the curriculum. Such attention was necessary to build a foundational understanding of our approach because for many teaching history as an interpretive, evidence-based discipline was a major shift.

After these initial sessions, we introduced teachers to the curriculum, one investigation per meeting. We used Grossman et al.’s (2009) framework of sharing representations, decompositions, and approximations of practice to help teachers learn to use each investigation. In each session, we modeled the use of the curriculum materials for that investigation, debriefed the key elements of each investigation, talked through how teachers might enact these elements, and gave teachers opportunities to practice teaching key aspects of the investigation to their peers. Practice sessions involved teachers working in small groups of four to five, taking turns using the materials, sharing feedback, and brainstorming how to use the curriculum effectively in their classrooms. In this way, professional development sessions included modeling the use of
disciplined literacy tools as well as practice in using these tools. Because we were also observing teachers’ implementation, we were also able to respond to observations of teachers’ use of tools and challenges they faced in using them in the field.

Aside from building conceptual understanding and practice, analysis of student work was the third major component of our professional development efforts. Once teachers began using the curriculum, we gave them one to two hours during each PD session to consider their students’ writing and reflect on their work with students. Teachers brought in their students’ work and tracked the progress of three to five students over the course of the year. We asked teachers to look for strengths and areas of improvement in their own students’ work and to write about them in journals. Then, teachers typically shared their findings with partners and talked through how they could help these students continue to improve in the next investigation.

By mid-year we found that students’ essays included aspects of historical thinking and writing that demonstrated growth; however, teachers did not always notice these qualities of students’ writing or consider how to support students’ growth. We suspected that teachers did not notice qualities of historical thinking or writing in part because of their understanding of these concepts. Therefore, after the fourth investigation we started analysis sessions by sharing two examples of the strengths and weaknesses that we noticed in students’ work and exploring what particular aspects of historical thinking and writing involved. We also modeled and discussed how to think through identifying student needs and how teachers might work with these students in the future. In this way we tried to integrate opportunities for teachers to develop their knowledge of history and students learning in history.

Data Sources
The main source of data for this paper includes teachers’ written reflections on student work from Investigations 1, 3, and 5, as well as a comparison of student work across the year (what we refer to as the “May assignment”). Teachers wrote their reflections in a notebook that we gave them at the beginning of the year. We collected these notebooks after each class, gave teachers feedback on their ideas in the margins, and made changes to the way we asked them to reflect on student learning in response to their insights and struggles. We also had access to half of the student essays that teachers responded to and compared these essays to teachers’ reflections, looking for overlap and discrepancies.

In order to support teachers’ thinking, we varied the prompts they responded to when considering students’ work. The prompt for reflection on student work from Investigation #1 asked teachers to consider students’ strengths and weaknesses, share examples of each, look for particular aspects of historical writing (e.g., support their argument with evidence, evaluate the quality of the evidence, consider both sides), and share ideas for next steps with students. The prompt for the Investigations #2 and #3 analysis did not ask for examples but did ask teachers to compare their focal students to other students in the class. This prompt continued to ask teachers to consider strengths, weaknesses, and next steps. For Investigations #4-6, we asked teachers to select and share excerpts of student writing to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses they noted as well as identify goals and feedback for students based on these analyses. Lastly, in May, we asked teachers to compare students’ work from across the year, share examples of improvements and difficulties, and consider how they could help students improve. In summary, prompts for Investigation 1, 5, and May asked for specific examples. Investigation #5 asked teachers to identify goals and feedback for students where the other prompts asked teachers to identify next steps to help students. Prompts for Investigation #3 asked teachers to compare individual student
performance to other students’ performance whereas the May prompt asked teachers to compare the same student’s performance across time.

Despite these attempts, teachers responded to any one prompt in very different ways, so our directives may not have determined teachers’ attentions. Nevertheless, the findings in this paper should be read in the context of our shifting efforts to direct teachers’ attention to students’ historical thinking and writing as well as to their pedagogical responses to students’ work.

**Data Analysis**

We brought a conception of historical writing to our analysis of teacher notebooks and student essays that integrates argumentation and historical thinking (cf. Monte-Sano, 2010). We focused on a central aspect of historical writing in our analyses and in constructing the intervention: the disciplinary use of evidence in writing historical arguments. To us, the disciplinary use of evidence in writing historical argument includes taking an interpretive position; using relevant evidence to support this position; explaining how evidence supports this position; justifying one’s use of particular documentary evidence by considering the author’s reliability, an author’s perspective, the relationship of the evidence to its historical context, or comparison of the value of the available evidence; interpreting evidence appropriately; and recognition of conflicting evidence. This analytic frame guided our interpretation of the data.

Initially, we read through half of the notebooks and transcribed verbatim notes along with our commentary in a chart that organized data into three columns for each reflection: student work, what teachers notice, and researcher comments. We recorded our observations of teachers’ reflections, discussed them, and developed a list of recurring themes that were common across notebooks. We re-read 1-2 notebooks, organizing data according to theme, debriefed this second pass through the notebooks, and revised the themes we had identified so that they were more
precise and reflective of the data. Through this process, we created a coding protocol that involved looking for evidence of ten codes in teachers’ four reflections, transcribing examples that illustrated teachers’ tendencies with regard to each code, and tracking researcher commentary. We coded all of the teacher notebooks using the coding scheme that we had developed inductively through multiple passes at the data.

We continued our analyses by creating different data displays (e.g., Miles & Huberman, 1994) that helped us synthesize findings across all notebooks, compare data, and tabulate frequencies. One series of charts tabulated teachers’ tendencies for each code and highlighted where teacher tendencies were more (green) or less (red) consistent with the intervention. This allowed us to identify the number of teachers who demonstrated each pattern and how those numbers changed according to reflection (e.g., reflection on student work from Investigation 1, 3, or 5, or May). Within the code “focus on aspects of historical writing related to the intervention,” researchers noted which particular aspects of historical writing teachers attended to. We created another chart that specified how many teachers noticed each aspect of historical writing (e.g., provided evidence, historical thinking) in which reflection. We also transcribed all of the examples of teachers’ attention to evaluation of evidence and historical thinking so that we could identify patterns within this code (e.g., what aspects of historical thinking did teachers pay attention to?), compare what teachers’ noticed when writing about evaluation or historical thinking, and tabulate the number of teachers who attended to either in each reflection.

Findings

What Teachers Noticed

Attention to key aspects of historical writing. Over the course of the year, teachers increasingly focused on aspects of historical writing when analyzing student work and noticed
more sophisticated aspects of historical writing. Initially, the attention of those who reflected on students’ writing was diffuse, spread across a range of considerations without any overarching frame for thinking about student writing. In reflecting on work from the first investigation, only half of the teachers noticed aspects of historical writing that were related to the intervention goals even though they had already participated in three all-day meetings. And those teachers paid attention to different aspects of historical writing without a common focus—while some focused on whether students annotated documents, answered the question or used evidence in their essays, others focused on their historical thinking and evaluation of evidence. At the same time, teachers paid attention to students’ engagement, lack of paragraph indentations, word choices, style, and the length of responses. Four teachers did not focus on their students’ writing when prompted at this point in the year and instead focused on their teaching of the first investigation.

In reflecting on the third investigation and for every reflection thereafter, teachers’ attentions showed greater consistency of focus and emphasis on historical writing. Specifically, in these reflections, every teacher noted some aspect of historical writing in their students’ work that was central to the intervention. For the third investigation, teachers’ attention concentrated on whether students answered the historical question (7 of 14) and on students’ inclusion of evidence (10 of 14) in their essays. Mr. Jacobs was one of the seven teachers who noticed his student’s response to the historical question. He emphasized strengths and weaknesses when he wrote, “[the student] failed to use the introduction to inform the reader of his conclusion… [the student’s] strength is that he did ‘early’ in the essay, though in the second paragraph, answer the historical question.” Mr. Addison was one of the ten teachers who attended to students’ inclusion

2 All names are pseudonyms to protect participants’ confidentiality.
of evidence in their essays. Of one student Addison wrote, “Unfortunately, his writing is mostly a copied quote with little analysis.” Of another Addison noted that the student, “included support for his conclusion, using two quotes.”

By the fifth investigation, teachers continued to focus on whether students answered the question and used evidence (11 and 12 teachers respectively), but they also concentrated on students’ explanation and evaluation of evidence as well as their historical thinking (10-11 teachers focused on each). Finally, in May when teachers compared students’ work across investigations, most teachers concentrated on their students’ use of evidence, rebuttal, and evaluation of evidence (9—10 teachers focused on each); five focused on the historical content and historical thinking found in students’ essays and seven considered students’ explanations of evidence. Teachers increasingly attended to students’ historical writing. Although only three teachers noticed students’ historical thinking in the beginning of the year, the majority of teachers noticed students’ historical thinking and evaluation of evidence by the fifth investigation.

Attention to evaluative and historical thinking. Before we explore what such attention meant, it may help to share some background about evaluation and historical thinking as it relates to this particular project. The text structure we introduced to teachers and students in this curriculum included supporting paragraphs that share a quotation or example to support a claim, an explanation of that evidence, and an evaluation that indicates the value of the evidence for the argument. “Evaluation of evidence” is a phrase we introduced to teachers and students (via curriculum materials) and occupied a specific place in the text structure (the last sentence of a supporting or rebuttal paragraph) as a reminder for students to integrate judgments about their evidence in their essays. Evaluative statements might incorporate historical thinking and can also
emphasize the logic of a particular excerpt or how an excerpt supports a student’s argument. We built historical thinking into the curriculum via reading and annotating primary sources and hoped the text structure specification to evaluate evidence would encourage students to integrate historical thinking into their essays. Specifically, over the course of the year, the curriculum exposed students to sourcing and contextualization, recognizing multiple perspectives, and evidence-based writing. In our professional development meetings, we explored these aspects of historical thinking with teachers throughout the year.

When teachers wrote about the substance of students’ evaluations (beyond just noting that students did or did not evaluate evidence), they framed evaluation as a consideration of author reliability (63% of the time), historical context (16%), or the significance of evidence (21%). After the first investigation, Ms. James highlighted author reliability when considering her students’ evaluations. She found her students were “able to evaluate the sources independently to determine if they trusted them.” Then she shared a specific example: “In his evaluation, [one student] weighed if someone would be more likely to lie in a diary or sworn statement.” Ms. James highlighted author reliability issues by noticing her students’ thinking about the genre of different sources and how that related to credibility issues. Mr. Addison was among a minority of teachers whose attention to evaluation emphasized historical context. A student struggled to explain why the evidence she presented in her Investigation 5 essay about nonviolent approaches to abolitionism was convincing. Addison wrote, “I would have [her] evaluate why fighting doesn’t work with a concrete example of a slave uprising that did not work.” Here, the teacher recognizes a student’s failed evaluation and suggests using the historical context—in this case, examples of failed slave revolts—to bolster the student’s evidence about the ineffectiveness of violent action. Mr. Bismark attended to evaluation by
looking for why students’ selected their evidence and the relevance of evidence to the argument. After Investigation 1 Bismark wrote, “Some of the students struggle with explaining why that evidence is important and how it relates to their side or why they chose some evidence over other evidence.” He continued to focus on this issue after Investigation 3, noting “most of them struggle to evaluate why they chose the evidence they did.” Asking students to justify their selection of evidence can highlight how a piece of evidence relates to the main argument or the value of the evidence selected as compared to other available evidence.

In contrast, one third of teachers’ comments about students’ evaluations only focused on whether or not students had evaluated the evidence they used and did not focus on the substance of students’ essays. For example, after Investigation 5 Ms. Chester wrote, “Overall, the majority of students have improved and are getting the 3 steps of the support (eval can still be weak).” The three steps of supporting paragraphs included evidence, explanation of the evidence, and evaluation of the evidence. It’s not clear from her reflection why Chester said that students’ evaluations were weak. Her reference to the three steps makes us wonder whether she checked sentences off for completion rather than focused on the quality. Other teachers made incredibly vague comments about students’ evaluations. For example in reflecting on student work from Investigation 5, Ms. Blue wrote, “most of her evaluation needs some more work” and Mr. Isakson wrote “I would like him to evaluate it a little better.” Although the majority of teachers noted students’ evaluations, this attention did not always indicate clarity or understanding on the part of teachers.

In contrast, those teachers’ who attended to students’ historical thinking consistently demonstrated their understanding of historical thinking in their reflections. Overall, teachers
made 26 comments about students’ historical thinking in the reflections we analyzed\(^3\) and each of these comments demonstrated understanding of some aspect of historical thinking. Teachers highlighted students’ comments about author reliability most often (54% of the time). For example, when noticing her students’ lack of consideration for author reliability, Ms. James shared, “Goals I would set for these students would be to work on explaining why they believe or disbelieve an author.”

Teachers also attended to students’ contextualization (15%), recognition of historical perspectives (11.5%), use of authors’ names or locations (11.5%),\(^4\) and full consideration of evidence (8%). Mr. Addison noticed that one student shared details about the treatment of slaves in the 1800s as a way to bolster his argument that abolitionists would need to fight to free slaves. He wrote, “This shows [the student] thought about the conflict and he contextualized the documents.” In noting historical perspectives, teachers picked up on student comments that indicated they had recognized that an author or person in the past had a particular world view. For example, Ms. Kady wrote, “[the student] understood that the documents were written by someone and they are expressing the views of certain groups/individuals.” Sometimes when teachers noted a student’s use of an author’s name or location, their commentary was fairly shallow as with Ms. Chester who wrote, “Many are not doing well with opening/closing paragraphs and detail things like naming author, background, being specific.” In other instances, teachers noted the use of authors’ names and locations as Mr. Isakson did (“He…gave credit to the authors”) and then followed up with more profound attention to students’ historical thinking. Mr. Isakson later wrote in the same reflection, “Even though the document disagreed with his

\(^3\) Four teachers attended to students’ historical thinking from the beginning, starting with their reflection on work from Investigation 1. By Investigation 5, ten teachers commented on their students’ historical thinking, although this number dropped to four in the May reflection.

\(^4\) While use of authors’ names and locations does not necessarily demonstrate historical thinking, we referred to such moves as beginning steps.
position he still considered its validity.” Here, Isakson identifies his student’s ability to consider counter-evidence, regardless of his beliefs. Similarly, Mr. Bismark noted a goal for students to “focus more on using the evidence presented and trying to rid themselves of previous bias/judgment.” In these last two examples, teachers attended to students’ full consideration of the evidence, a part of historical thinking that Wineburg (2001) has referred to as “suspending judgment.”

**Attention to quality and completion.** In addition to their growing attention to aspects of historical writing and consideration of students’ historical thinking and evaluation of evidence, teachers increasingly focused on the quality of students’ work and the ideas in students’ work. After Investigation 1 and 3, the majority of teachers focused on whether students had completed particular aspects of writing. For example, after Investigation 3 Ms. Blue wrote, “The Proficient and Advanced students were able to answer the historical question, identify where the events took place and also take a position… both have supporting details and quotes.” Blue catalogs students’ achievements as though checking steps off a list without attending to any examples of these achievements or engagement with students’ thinking. Ten other teachers took a similar approach in reflecting on students’ work from Investigation 3 and only two teachers commented on the quality of students’ writing or thinking in this reflection. And although eight teachers focused on completion in the last two reflections we analyzed, seven focused on the quality of students’ work (three teachers focused on both). Mr. Isakson’ reflections represented this progress in attending to the quality of students’ work over their completion. For Investigation 3 he wrote, “The lower level students wrote about the same amount of information, but they included more quotes, evidence, and explanations.” Yet, after Investigation 5 Isakson shared an example of student work and his thoughts about it: “I believe violence is the answer because if
you use peace they will continue to get whipped.’ The student needs a clearer explanation because whipping isn’t the issue, being free is. I would ask them to focus on the controversy more.” Mr. Lagard also attended to students’ ideas. A student argued that nonviolence would “solve the problem [of slavery]… the problem is gone and it won’t come back.” Lagard wrote in his reflection, “He shows that he has thought and evaluated the quote before. However I would speak to him about the loop holes that he did not account for. Ex: Civil Rights Movement and who went to jail and how problems took a while to resolve.” Although Lagard jumps time periods—from abolitionism in the mid-1800s to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, he does recognize what his student is saying and responds to that students’ ideas by pushing the student further. Teachers increasingly focused on the quality of students’ work AND completion as opposed to only focusing on students’ completion of different pieces of historical essays. As they did so, teachers showed greater engagement with students’ thinking.

**Consistency between student work and teachers’ attention.** Teachers’ analysis of students’ essays became increasingly consistent with what we saw in students’ writing as the year progressed. However, we could not track this theme for all teachers, depending on availability of student work. Of the seven (Investigation 1 and 3 reflection) or eight (Investigation 5 and May reflection) teachers who reflected on students’ work that we also collected, 57% made comments that we saw as consistent with students’ work in Investigation 1. Ms. Blue’s reflections demonstrate what we mean by attention that is inconsistent with students’ work. After Investigation 5 her reflection focused on the length of one student’s essay, yet the student had written an argumentative essay with supporting evidence, a rebuttal, and historical thinking. In one supporting paragraph, the student explained the perspective and reliability of an author he had cited. He wrote, “My evaluation is the man who said this was a slave once, so he
knows how the slaves were treated. He also know that as a free man you don’t have to be anything of those things.” Yet, Ms. Blue concentrated on the length of this student’s essay in her reflection.

By Investigation 5, 88% of teachers made comments that we saw as consistent with students’ work. For example, when one of Mr. Addison’s students wrote a one-paragraph essay that included a position, documentary evidence, and a rebuttal, the teacher noticed both strengths and weaknesses. Addison wrote, “Improvements/strengths—He has evidence of a rebuttal, he said why he chose his side. Areas for improvement—Writing in 5 paragraphs, explaining why the evidence is trustworthy.” Addison also wrote that the student listed quotes without “tying them to anything.” When we looked at this student’s essay we saw a string of three quotations in a row without explanation or rationale for why this evidence is trustworthy or how it supported the student’s claim. At this point in the year, all but two teachers made comments about students’ work that either misinterpreted their work or missed important aspects of students’ developing historical writing. We interpret this to mean one of two things: either teachers and researchers developed more of a shared lens for looking at student work over the course of the year or teachers learned more about historical writing over the course of the year and were therefore less likely to misinterpret student work. We tend to interpret this change as an indication of teachers’ growing understanding of historical writing as evidence-based argument.

**What Teachers Did With What They Noticed**

Over the course of the year, the teachers made progress in identifying student needs and specifying how to help students. While part of what teachers’ noticed in students’ historical writing was their strengths, they also increasingly identified areas of weakness that were directly aligned with the intervention.
In Investigation 1, less than half of the teachers identified student needs related to the intervention. By Investigation 3, however, 11 out of 12 teachers had begun to focus on student needs directly related to writing historical essays grounded in evidence. These included statements such as those made by Ms. Kady who noted her student’s struggle “with the rebuttal paragraph and evaluation of the evidence.” We considered the identification of students’ needs or weaknesses as a first step in thinking about how to help students. But teachers’ ideas for how to help students lagged behind their identification of student needs.

For example, even by Investigation 3, only 7 out of 14 teachers offered even general ideas for next steps, while 6 of 14 teachers offered no next steps. While teachers offered more specific details for next steps as the intervention progressed, there were some lapses in this trend towards the end of the school year. In Investigation 5, 70% of the teachers provided specific next steps while only 58% did so in May. In fact, three teachers did not specify any next steps in May.

This trajectory is interesting to note particularly given the assignments teachers were given. In Investigation 1, 3, and in May teachers were asked to state what they could do to help their students improve. In contrast, in Investigation 5 teachers were asked to identify goals teachers might set and feedback they might give. In Investigations 1, 3, and in May, the language of the assignment was more consistent with coding, yet the percentage of teachers who specified ways to help was lower across these time points than in Investigation 5.

Instead, the majority of teachers seemed to focus more on student initiative instead of steps the teachers could do to drive improvements. For example, Ms. Reston noted that a student needed to “evaluate with better support” and suggested that she would support her by telling her to “carefully read and evaluate the source.” These types of general next steps of what to do,
rather than providing specific details for how the student or teacher would execute next steps, were common across teachers’ reflections.

In contrast to Ms. Reston, whenever Mr. Isakson identified a similar need in one of his students, he would frequently propose specific and well-developed next steps to address his students’ needs. For example, he stated that he would “have students do peer response and share more of their work while critiquing it at the same time.” Nevertheless, Mr. Isakson was in the minority in this regard. In effect, while teachers improved in their ability to identify student needs as the year progressed, their ideas for how to support those needs remained less developed.

**Competing Lenses**

Even though the majority of teacher comments emphasized historical writing after Investigation #3, between three and six teachers continued to simultaneously focus on other aspects of writing that were not directly related to the intervention. Teachers attended to a range of issues, including lack of paragraph indentations, the length of students’ essays, style and word choices, student focus and motivation, formatting, time management, and promoting independence. This tells us that other concerns were salient for teachers as they worked with students on writing. Although we emphasized historical writing, we also encouraged teachers to be responsive to their students’ thinking, writing, and needs. It is worth considering the range of teacher concerns to help them prepare to work with students on their history essays and to build an intervention that is mindful of the context in which it is used.

For the most part, the range of teachers’ concerns helped us think about what was important to them and how they thought about students’ writing. While teachers expressed concern about their students’ progress over the year, two teachers expressed this concern while also demonstrating evidence of deficit thinking about their students’ capabilities. This disposition
toward students attributes students’ school failure to internal deficits such as motivation or intellectual deficiencies (Valencia, 1997). In addition, teachers who view students from a deficit perspective may blame students’ lack of progress on knowledge or skill deficits caused in part by “uncaring” families who do not value or support their child’s education (Betsinger, García, & Guerra, 2001; Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, & Foley, 2001). Both of these characteristics of deficit thinking – blaming internal deficiencies and blaming parents or families – emerged in two journal analyses. For example, Ms. Chester, while expressing confidence in a student’s overall capabilities, reflected about the student’s performance in May. She wrote, “LAZY, all year she should have been producing better essays. Puts no effort into any of her work. Only essay worth anything is the Cherokee essay.” Similarly, when reflecting about another student’s work in May, the teacher commented, "Julian is bright but so very unmotivated. His parents do most of the work for him and I think he doesn't see the need to do anything if he doesn't have to." These comments place the responsibility for students’ lack of progress on students (as lazy or unmotivated) or their “unsupportive” families rather than recognizing the teachers’ role in providing support for student growth. This kind of deficit thinking likely made it more difficult for teachers to engage with students’ thinking and figure out how they might best support their students’ learning.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

We use our analyses of teachers’ reflections to give us insight into their thinking and to consider the efficacy of our professional development efforts. We see several successes, including an increasing focus on key aspects of historical writing; attention to evaluative and historical thinking; consideration of the quality of students’ work, not just their completion of particular elements of writing; consistency between students’ essays and teachers’ analyses; and
skill in identifying students’ needs. In important ways, participating in a year-long professional development course focused on historical reading, thinking, and writing with opportunities to develop conceptual understanding, practice, and analyze student work appeared to expand teachers’ understanding of historical writing (alongside teachers’ work in implementing the curriculum).

At the same time, we see room for improvement. First, by the end of the year some teachers continued to look for completion rather than quality, misinterpret or overlook aspects of their students’ writing, focus on perceived student deficits rather than considering how they could help students, misunderstand evaluation, or struggle to come up with next steps to help students. We didn’t reach everyone and we didn’t always convey key aspects of the intervention well.

Second, the discrepancies between teachers’ comments about historical thinking and evaluation are notable. Since we created the term “evaluation” to signal students (and teachers) to bring historical thinking into their essays as they moved through the process of writing, we were pleased to see overlap between evaluation and historical thinking. That is, teachers attended to author reliability, contextualization, and evidence selection when noting evaluation or historical thinking. However, the pattern of vague references to students’ evaluations and greater attention to whether students completed the evaluation step calls into question the utility of using “evaluation” as a signal for integrating historical thinking in writing. Because we gave students and teachers a specific text structure, they could use it as a formula to look for an evaluation in the 3rd sentence of a body or rebuttal paragraph without attending to the quality of these sentences. Further, teachers’ comments about students’ completion of the evaluation ‘step’ were vague enough that we were not certain that teachers understood the concept of evaluation.
Indeed, in our observation data teachers struggled most consistently with explaining evaluations and the role of evaluation in an essay to students. Because we highlighted evaluative thinking in our professional development and in the curriculum materials, teachers likely discerned that evaluation was important, but their comments and teaching indicate that they didn’t fully grasp this concept. In contrast, we saw understanding in teachers’ commentary about historical thinking. Our use of “evaluation” was intended to simplify the writing process for students and teachers by creating a place to incorporate historical thinking in essays. Since most teachers appeared to understand examples of students’ historical thinking by the end of the year, keeping the language consistent and simply using the terms “historical thinking in writing” and “historical thinking in reading” would be more straightforward.

Based in part on our recognition of the different ways in which students incorporated historical thinking in their essays and teachers’ thinking about those essays, we revised our reading and writing supports to explicitly point to these aspects of historical thinking in the final year of the project. The IREAD foldable identifies three ways of “judging” evidence—examining the author’s reliability, assessing the influence of context, and determining the quality of an author’s facts and examples—and these three aspects of historical thinking are integrated in the text structure guidelines as well. We hope this level of explicitness will help teachers and students understand how to integrate historical thinking into writing.

Third, we were troubled to see that teachers had greater difficulty or reluctance in defining next steps for working with their students. It appears to us that without the curriculum supports, the teachers were unclear as to how to work with students on historical writing (e.g., once a lesson from the curriculum is taught or when what students need help with falls outside one of the lesson plans from the curriculum). We have thought about how to develop teachers’
capacity to support students’ development as thinkers and writers and have incorporated these ideas in our professional development efforts this year. During our classes with teachers, we have continued to look at student work together. Based on these analyses, we have discussed how to respond to a class and practiced figuring out what to say to individual students to help them move forward. As we go over each investigation in this year’s professional development, we prompt teachers to make notes in the margins of the lesson plans about how to help particular students or classes based on our group discussions of the challenges students will likely encounter. We have yet to determine if these efforts help build teachers’ capacity to work with students on historical writing outside of the specific supports already built in to the curriculum.

Fourth, participating teachers worked in contexts that presented them with multiple and varied challenges and restraints. We recognize this issue and believe we need to reflect on its potential impact more thoroughly. For now, we can share several restraints that teachers mentioned repeatedly and that may have influenced our findings. The devaluing of social studies in the county schools meant less and less time for U.S. history, bigger class sizes and more classes per teacher, fewer U.S. history teachers in any one building, and repeated interruptions during the school day. Although the district is shifting towards a history curriculum that emphasizes questions and exploration, the existing curriculum standards for U.S. history in the county emphasized breadth over depth and included a pacing guide to which teachers are expected to adhere. As a consequence, teachers felt as though they had to cover what was in the curriculum and did not have as much time as they would have liked to devote to our lessons. Additionally, the state’s high-stakes testing regimen included a reading comprehension test with a formulaic essay (“Brief Constructed Response” or BCR) that emphasized summary of information. While our intervention likely supported students’ reading comprehension, teachers
and students had to shift their expectations for writing when working on materials from our intervention. Finally, teachers repeatedly shared that our approach to teaching was quite different than what they were accustomed to or to how they were prepared as teachers. Although they welcomed the shift, it was indeed a shift for many. Competing influences certainly constrained teachers’ work and meant that teachers had to find ways to integrate our curriculum and ideas from professional development into their existing complex work lives.

Limitations. Lastly, we recognize that the assignments that prompted teachers to reflect on student work varied, and this variation may have influenced teachers’ responses. At times, this limited our ability to make claims about teacher learning, so we also compared reflections from different assignments to get a better sense of the affordances and constraints of different kinds of prompts. Of the four responses we analyzed for this study, teachers were most likely to include specific statements about student work, ground their analyses of student work in examples, articulate next steps for helping students, and analyze student work in a way that was consistent with the work in their responses to the Investigation 5 prompt. Although previous prompts had asked for examples, this prompt asked teachers to include excerpts from students’ work as they reflected. In addition, during the class prior to this and the class in which teachers responded to this prompt, we analyzed a couple of samples of student writing together before teachers analyzed their own students’ writing. We strategically selected these samples of student writing to reflect strengths and weaknesses we had noticed when observing the investigations prior to each of these workshops. We suggest that asking for specific examples of student work and analyzing student work together may help teachers make specific, grounded statements about student work, make observations that are consistent with that work, and articulate specific
next steps for their teaching. However, it’s also possible that by this later date in the year teachers’ thinking had developed as a result of earlier work.

In another assignment variation in May, we asked teachers to compare the same students across time. In these responses, we saw teachers focus on the quality of students’ work more than completion and identify student needs that emphasized aspects of historical writing more than in response to other prompts. We can tentatively suggest that comparing individual student’s work across time may help teachers focus on the quality of student work and identify student needs. Again, it’s also possible that teachers improved in these areas as a function of time more than the particular prompt they addressed. From a researcher perspective, having consistency across assignments would allow us to make more claims about growth. And, some balance of open-ended responses and specific prompts would give us an opportunity to see what teachers attend to on their own and how well they can attend to what we’ve identified as important.

In addition to variations in prompts, this study is limited in other ways. If we want to understand teachers’ learning, we need to compare teachers’ incoming thinking to their thinking as it develops over the year, and to their thinking at the end of the year. Teacher questionnaires and interviews gathered for this project will help us portray a more robust picture of their learning. And ideally, research on teacher learning would link analysis of professional development to the value-added by the PD (e.g., Wilson, 2009). We have more work to do to calculate the impact of the curriculum and professional development on student learning outcomes and to compare student growth to teachers’ learning. Such comparisons would allow us to understand the extent to which professional development efforts such as this matter when it comes to students’ progress with historical writing.
We are humbled by the task of creating professional development experiences that advance teachers’ learning in meaningful ways and the complexity of building teachers’ capacity to support their students’ historical reading, thinking, and writing. Although our 88-hour professional development experience and curriculum intervention certainly seemed to benefit teachers, one year was not enough for all of these teachers. And yet, the agenda to develop students’ historical thinking is both robust and, we believe, worthwhile. Without teachers who are prepared to support this agenda, we will not be able to move forward with the agenda. How then, are we to prepare teachers to teach historical literacy? We share our paper as one small effort to explore these issues and hope to spark conversation so that history education researchers can think together and address one of the biggest challenges facing history education: teacher professional development.
References


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