Context: The Foundation of Close Reading of Primary Source Texts

Dave Neumann  
*California State University Long Beach*

Nicole Gilbertson  
*University of California Irvine*

Lisa Hutton  
*California State University Dominguez Hills*

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) invite students to engage in close reading of primary source texts from American history, but an overly rigid definition of close reading that excludes providing background knowledge threatens to undermine these efforts. This approach flies in the face of decades of research on successful reading comprehension strategies. It also rejects the extensive literature on discipline-based learning in history, which has routinely affirmed the importance of context for understanding primary source texts. Primary sources are typically drawn from a world different from that of the students in time or place, or both. Teachers should provide historical context to their students by giving them information about the time, location, and purpose for the creation of the source. They should also situate the source in a specific location—whether local, national, or international—and examine the source in relation to other events of the time. Context is not the enemy of close reading of primary sources; context is the very thing that makes close reading possible and meaningful.

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**Introduction**

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent on errands, I always took my book with me, and by going on one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge.

-Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave* (1845).

Frederick Douglass first published an autobiography narrating his remarkable rise from slavery to freedom in 1845. Though still a fugitive slave, he had become a prominent advocate for emancipation. Stirred by the revivalist fires of the Second Great Awakening, Northern abolitionists had recently begun to call for immediate emancipation. Douglass eloquence in public speeches swayed many, and his command of language testified to slaves’ resilient
humanity in the face of slavery’s degradation. Indeed, Douglass primarily wrote his life story to dispel the doubts of White northerners that such an articulate individual could ever have been a slave. At a time when between 5 and 10% of slaves possessed basic literacy, such skepticism was not surprising.

As a result of his resiliency, Douglass crafted an account of his upbringing on a Maryland plantation, labor on Baltimore’s docks, and escape to the North. Douglass related how he eventually settled outside of Boston, the center of abolitionist activity. His autobiography, bearing introductions by prominent abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Theodore Dwight Weld, became an international success. Given the importance of literacy in Douglass’s life, it is not surprising his description of learning to read offers one of the most poignant passages the book.

The Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) invite students to engage in close reading of great primary source texts from American history, a practice that has gained widespread acceptance in history education (Bain, 2000; Lee, 2005; Seixas, 1993; VanSledright, 2002; Wineburg, 2001). At the same time, an overly rigid definition of close reading that excludes providing background knowledge threatens to undermine these efforts. In directing would be textbook providers to create text-dependent questions, The Revised Publishers’ Criteria for the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy, Grades 3–12 (2012) explains such questions “do not require information or evidence from outside the text or texts; they establish what follows and what does not follow from the text itself” (p. 6). Stated this way, the close reading approach would seem to fly in the face of decades of research on successful reading comprehension strategies. It also seems contrary to the extensive literature on discipline-based learning in history, which has routinely affirmed the importance of context for understanding primary source texts. Eighth graders reading about how Douglass learned to read will know little information about him or the time in which he lived as above discussed. No matter how carefully students read the passage, their understanding will be impoverished without a rich understanding of the context in which Douglass wrote. Context is not the enemy of close reading of primary sources; context is the very element that makes close reading possible and meaningful.

Common Core and Close Reading Strategies

The outstanding primary source texts included as exemplars in the CCSS illustrate why close reading of texts is such a crucial skill. While the CCSS documents never provide a formal definition of close reading, the first anchor reading standard implicitly does so when it directs students to: “Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010, p. 35). Students can only recognize the incisive logic of Thomas Paine’s (1776) call for rebellion in Common Sense after close, careful reading of the passage more than once (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010, p. 58). Students will only appreciate how tightly Abraham Lincoln (1863) connected each sentence of The Gettysburg Address when they read it slowly and attentively (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] and Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010). They will likely miss the moving rhetoric of Dr. Martin Luther King’s (1963) non-violent resistance in Letter from Birmingham Jail if they read casually (NGA Center and
These texts, and many others included in the exemplars, require close reading. They are demanding texts, but they also are texts worthy of careful examination, as they powerfully address key issues of enduring significance. The CCSS establishes an appropriately high bar in challenging students to read difficult texts.

The CCSS provide an opportunity for the educational community to support students in meeting the challenges of reading more rigorous text without discarding years of literacy research. The standards represent a significant improvement over existing state standards and their related tests that tend to focus on factual recall. The CCSS aim to prevent students from simply offering their opinions in response to questions teachers pose about challenging texts. Students, instead, will have to defend their answers using textual evidence. Meaningful discussion in history classes depends upon students’ ability to cite evidence in support of their claims.

Critics of pre-reading strategies rightly point out the absurdity of spending more time building background knowledge than reading a text, or talking so much about the text that students have no motivation to read it. That does not logically mean, however, that building background knowledge should be abandoned. When reading to build knowledge in a content area such as history, readers must have enough knowledge about a subject to construct meaning from the “complex texts” that are described in the CCSS. Though background knowledge is important in all types of reading, it is particularly important in learning new academic material (Anderson, 1984; Bloom, 1976; Dochy, Segers, & Buehl, 1999). According to Robert J. Marzano (2004), “… the research literature supports one compelling fact: what students already know about the content is one of the strongest indicators of how well they will learn new information relative to the content” (p. 1). In short, to understand texts selected for close reading effectively, students need appropriate background knowledge from their teachers.

The Role of Background Knowledge in Reading Comprehension

Though close reading is a key strategy for reading historical texts, research in historical thinking has not explicitly addressed close reading (Reisman, 2012); thus, the robust research literature on generic reading comprehension provides guidance on disciplinary reading in history, a subject that heavily depends on contextual knowledge for effective close reading. What does more general reading research tell us? In an analysis of over 40 studies, Michael Pressley and Peter Afflerbach (1995) found skilled readers regularly employ their background knowledge to construct meaning, interpret information, and connect new information to existing knowledge. These good readers actively search for main ideas and details and keep searching until they have the information they need to make sense of the text. In other words, these types of readers are self-regulated. Many of the best-known comprehension routines ask students to engage in talk around text. Guidance from a more expert adult or peer aims to help students internalize the concepts and strategies of questioning a text and improving their skill in reading as a result. The CCSS demands a new focus on text and textual evidence, which may mean rethinking the way comprehension and reading strategies are taught. According to Margaret McKeown, Isabel Beck, and Ronette Blake (2009), reading comprehension is strengthened when teachers focus primarily on students’ understanding of the text or content, as opposed to solely focusing on teaching strategies. Though students still learn and use reading strategies, instruction is centered on text and content through close reading and collaborative discussions. Generic reading strategies are of particular relevance when reading historical texts (Reisman, 2012). Indeed, the successful implementation of the Reading Like a Historian curriculum developed by Sam Wineburg and the Stanford History Education Group, showed “the processes of disciplinary and
general reading occur simultaneously” (Reisman, 2012, p. 105). As the Stanford History Education Group website (n.d.) indicates, the Reading Like a Historian curriculum emphasizes contextualization as one of its key disciplinary practices. The first step in all of the site’s inquiry lessons is “Establish relevant background and pose central historical question.” The authors note “(e)stablishing background knowledge is the first step in the inquiry process. This background frames the central historical question, and motivates students to investigate the documents accompany the lesson” (Stanford History Education Group, (n.d.) This conclusion springs from Wineburg’s earliest work; nearly 15 years ago, he identified context—the ability “to engage in an active process of connecting things in a pattern”—as one of the key attributes skilled readers bring to historical texts (Wineburg, 2001, p. 21).

The National Council for the Social Studies College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards (2013) highlights the significance of historical context for the development of explanations and interpretations of evidence. The C3 Framework, developed by social studies educators and scholars and facilitated by the Council of Chief School State Officers, suggests historical sources must be located in a particular time and place as well as assessed in relation to broader historical contexts. In order to develop historical interpretations or arguments, students must analyze a variety of sources to evaluate how and why a historical event occurred. A component of this evaluative work around sources requires students to situate the source in a specific time and location to better understand the point of view of the source and its significance for the historical record. Given this task, it will be the role of the teacher to provide the historical background, or at least to guide students through a variety of texts chosen by the teacher, to develop an explanation and assessment of the texts integral to reading in history-social science.

The Revised Publishers’ Criteria for the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy, Grades 3–12 (2012)—which will do as much to shape what gets taught in classrooms as the standards themselves—provides a rigid definition of close reading that virtually excludes background information. This document indicates 85-90% of questions should “not require information or evidence from outside the text or texts; they establish what follows and what does not follow from the text itself” (Coleman & Pimental, Revised Publishers’ Criteria for the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy, Grades 3–12, 2012, p. 6). While the intention of this directive may be to encourage publishers to eliminate giving the answers to questions in their introductory material, a perhaps unintended consequence may be the elimination of all context and background information for texts in classroom instruction. Students will only be able to fully develop the kinds of critical thinking skills the CCSS calls for, however, when teachers move outside of the text. Primary source texts, including poetry and literature from previous eras, do not exist in a vacuum ready to release universal truths to the careful reader.

Primary sources are typically drawn from a world that is different from students’ own in time or place. Today’s readers do not know much of the cultural context the author and his original audience took for granted. Students, for example, may not know anything about the author while the original audience may have possessed some information. Readers, no matter how closely they read, can never discover such assumed knowledge, yet it is crucial for making sense of the texts. Students may know something about Abraham Lincoln, but if they don’t know when or why he delivered The Gettysburg Address, they can’t make good sense of his argument, no matter how closely they read. If they do not know who Winston Churchill was, or the state of Europe when he delivered his address “Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat; Address to
Parliament on May 13th, 1940," they will likewise struggle to understand what they are reading. They, moreover, risk evaluating all historical documents by situating them within their own social world of the 21st century (NGA Center and CCSSO, 2010).

**Context as Background Knowledge for Primary Sources**

To engage in the close reading of primary sources, students must have an understanding of the historical context of the source. This background knowledge does not give away the meaning of the text for the student or make reading the text unnecessary. Rather, historical context provides students with the necessary frame for better analyzing the source and linking this new knowledge to the purpose for the lesson or unit. Historical context exists outside the text, while informing students’ reading of the text. Context, therefore, should be part of an introduction to a source reading. According to Wineburg (2001), “Contexts are neither ‘found nor ‘located,’ and words are not ‘put’ into context. Context, from the Latin, *contexere,* means to weave together, to engage in an active process of connecting things in a pattern” (p. 21). Close reading and discussing historical context weave together to form student understanding on a deeper level.

Teachers provide historical context by giving students information about the time and location of the source’s creation and the author’s purpose. These categories might be thought of as temporal and spatial contexts (Wineburg, 2001). Students should also consider the “climate of opinion” and the “biography” of the person when analyzing sources (Wineburg, 2001, pp. 90-91). Authors of historical texts shared the discourses and ways of seeing of the times in which they lived. It is thus important for students to gain a deeper understanding of this world. For example, while Douglass provides a bit of context for the reader by explaining that, “it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country,” students need background information about antebellum slavery to understand his deeper meaning about education (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010, pp. 90-91). Without a sense of the bitter power struggle slaveholders waged to control slaves through legal, economic, and cultural means, students will be unable to appreciate Douglass’s great victory in learning to read.

Teachers should situate the source in a specific location—whether local, national, or international—and examine the source in relation to other events of the time. One can imagine this type of context as a lens or a microscope that looks initially at the local trends, ideas, and events important for the creation of the source. Shifting the lens further outward, one can consider the regional or national context of the source and possibly even broaden the scope to include an international dimension. Beginning with the American context, it is clear that the document’s subtext is the abolitionist debate in the United States. Moving the lens out, teachers can help students better understand the *Autobiography* (Douglass, 1845) by viewing the abolitionist movement in a trans-Atlantic setting. To better understand Douglass’ inclusion of the topic of Catholic Emancipation and the American and British orators mentioned in the text, teachers may need to explain that abolitionism emerged in both the U.S.A. and Britain and included a focus on universal rights, not limited to slaves, which also included Catholics and working class people. Without this background, students may not have the knowledge to make sense of this crucial part of the passage and might skip over it, or not fully comprehend Douglass’ use of the liberal concepts of universal rights and responsibilities of all humans, not just privileged white men.

To fully comprehend the meaning of a text, students must move beyond the setting to consider why it was written and who would have read this document. It is certainly true
Douglass’ first-hand account offers Northern readers an insight into the life of a slave, thus exemplifying the brutality—physical, emotional, and mental—of the Southern system through the momentous events of Douglass’ life. It is crucial, however, students know about his role in the abolitionist movement to grasp why he chose to publish an autobiography and for whom he wrote. Public documents, such as Douglass’s widely-published autobiography, employ genre, language, and tone in ways distinct from other types of primary source texts. By providing students with an understanding of the purpose of the autobiography, the features it employs, such as first-person narrative and memory, as well as the very personal tone Douglass used to engage the reading public, the teacher will illuminate the power of this document. Students can read the text with the purpose of understanding how Douglass employed the Autobiography to sway readers against slavery and in favor of abolition.

To further develop historical context, teachers should frame relevant text-dependent questions as students engage in close reading of historical texts. The CCSS Grades 6-12 Literacy in History-Social Science requires students to “interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text” (CCSS ELA Standards, 2010, p. 35). To support students in this interpretive task, teachers must offer them the background knowledge and historical context to be able to consider how a word or phrase was defined at the time under study and how the author employs this language to present his or her point of view. The CCSS offer an exemplar for this type of word-level analysis, requiring students to analyze how James Madison defines “faction” in the Federalist Papers (CCSS ELA Standards, 2010, p. 40).

Consider the use of freedom in Douglass’s autobiography. Teachers might prompt students with text-dependent questions to consider how he frames his own relationship to freedom and how he defines freedom throughout the text. With background knowledge about the historical context of the abolitionist debate, and the opportunity to juxtapose this knowledge with other primary sources from this period, students would be able to develop nuanced definitions of “freedom.” Without this depth of background, students might simplistically relate their own life experiences to Douglass’s through a simple free-unfree binary. With historical context, however, students’ reading of Douglass’s text offers an opportunity to develop a deep understanding of the many ways Douglass uses his autobiography to define freedom while he engages readers in a call to action on behalf of the men and women who were barred from this universal right.

**Conclusion**

Background knowledge is a key ingredient of reading comprehension and learning in general; readers actively construct meaning from text in a complex transaction that includes the text and the reader. This transaction further includes context of when, where, and how a text is read. For comprehension to occur, a reader must generate relationships between the text parts to link the ideas of the text and integrate that new information into his or her prior knowledge. Since there is substantial confusion among history-social science teachers regarding Common Core’s impact on their own instruction, it might be worth underscoring a few key points. Teachers need to assist students with the meaning of texts before, during, and after reading. In planning, it might be helpful to keep the following questions in mind:

1. What historical background context do students really need to know before reading a text to help them get all they can out of it? Depending on the text, students will need either a little or a substantial amount of context before they can meaningfully engage with the text. It’s helpful for teachers to clearly identify what that contextual knowledge is, so students’ time in the text is challenging but still meaningful.
2. Then, how can I immerse them in the text, posing an overarching investigative question, as well as more specific text-dependent questions? Students should be required to wrestle with the text and use evidence to corroborate the claims they make in response to the overarching question.

3. How can I pose questions to help students explicitly link the historical background information (identified in the previous question) to evidence in the text, so students can make better sense of the passage than they would by simply reading the text on its own? This question bridges between background knowledge provided by the teacher and information in the text moving the lesson beyond text-dependent questions. This is entirely appropriate if teachers have addressed the previous bullet point by posing some clear text-dependent questions.

4. Finally, how can I facilitate the class’s consideration of the larger significance of a passage? This question moves beyond the text itself, as teachers encourage students to consider the broader importance of the document in its own era, later on, and perhaps in the present. While teachers want to avoid presentism, they should always help students think about why the document they have been reading so closely and carefully matters. Text-dependent questions are vital to effective understanding of historical documents. They, however, are not sufficient. The outstanding primary source texts included as exemplars in the CCSS illustrate why background knowledge is so essential to successful close reading. Students can only recognize the incisive logic of Thomas Paine’s call for rebellion in Common Sense after careful reading. Students will only appreciate how tightly Lincoln connected each sentence of The Gettysburg Address in his call for “a new birth of freedom” when they read it attentively (NGA Center and CCSSO, 2010, p. 123). They will miss the moving rhetoric of King’s non-violent resistance in Letter from Birmingham Jail if they read casually. If students know nothing about the Jim Crow South—segregation, lynching, the Ku Klux Klan—they will miss King’s point, or understand it merely as a generic plea for equality. Supplying students with the historical context of a primary source document offers them the frame they need to consider the larger significance of the document. Douglass’s Autobiography, a fundamental text in American history, is not just about a former slave. It is a political argument about the value of all humans by a man who led a personal campaign against slavery after freeing himself from its bonds and the ignorance imposed upon him by a slave society. All effective instruction in reading must ultimately attend to the question of significance. Students will only fully understand what these texts are saying—and why they matter—when they know about the historical context in which they were created.

References


**Web-Based References**


Authors’ Bios

Dave Neumann is Director of the History Project at CSU Long Beach, a member of the California History-Social Science Project (CHSSP). CHSSP is a K-16 collaborative of historians, teachers, and affiliated scholars dedicated to the pursuit of educational excellence in history and social science, with a special focus on meeting the needs of English learners, native speakers with low literacy, and students from economically disadvantaged communities. Email: dave.neumann@csulb.edu

Nicole Gilbertson is Director of the UCI History Project, University of California, Irvine a member of the CHSSP.

Lisa Hutton is Director of the History Project at CSU Dominguez Hills, California State University Dominguez Hills, a member of the CHSSP.