

Book Review

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Review of:

VanSledright, B. (2014). *Assessing historical thinking & understanding: Innovative designs for new standards*. New York, NY: Routledge.

History education researchers and history teachers have shown a growing interest in the teaching and learning of historical thinking. However, little has been said about how to assess disciplinary thinking in history. Bruce VanSledright, professor of history and social studies education at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, attempts to fill this void with this timely and important book, entitled *Assessing Historical Thinking & Understanding*. Throughout the book, VanSledright proposes new methods of history assessment that utilize best teaching practices that are aligned with the American Common Core English Language Arts strand concerning history (Common Core, 2015). This book is relevant to the Canadian context as well. Provincial curricula in Québec, British Columbia, Manitoba, and now Ontario emphasize historical thinking and as a result this book is a useful resource for teachers faced with teaching and assessing historical thinking.

The main focus in this book is using diagnostic assessment in order to provide formative evidence of students' understanding of historical thinking so that teachers may give feedback to the students, and adjust their teaching process accordingly. VanSledright has organized the book around the assessment triangle identified by Pellegrino, Chudowsky and Glasner (2001) where the three pillars of assessment are: a theoretical model of domain learning, tasks that allow for performance observation of learning goals, and the interpretation method for making inferences from student evidence. This part of the book is arguably the most important because it demonstrates a model for deep learning and understanding in history.

The strong emphasis on historical thinking in this book presupposes a familiarity with the processes and concepts of historical thinking. These concepts have become increasingly well known in the history education field through a number of publications (Lévesque, 2008; Lévesque, 2013; Seixas & Morton, 2013; VanSledright, 2010). VanSledright (2014) reviews these elements; however, the novice teacher or the history teacher without a strong background in the methodologies of the discipline may find his triangular model a roadblock to implementation. This is a valid concern because provincial curricula like Ontario in 2013 and Manitoba in 2014 have shifted towards historical thinking as underpinning learning in history (Government of Manitoba, 2014; Government of Ontario, 2013). Many history teachers lack the proper pedagogical skills in order to fully teach historical thinking in their classrooms. In Québec, where historical thinking has been part of the curriculum since 2007, many history teachers do not have formal training in history pedagogy (Éthier & Lefrançois, 2011). Also, when teachers have been progressively trained in disciplinary methods as history educators their experiences in teacher's college often do not transfer to their own classrooms (Barton & Levstik, 2004). It would appear that there may be difficulty in implementing the assessment mind-shift

when many teachers have not adopted the mindset that teaching historical thinking is, as VanSledright (2014) states, “*sine qua non*” (p. 6).

This book offers teachers an alternate method of assessing student knowledge of historical content, while also incorporating historical thinking concepts. Instead of the traditional multiple choice question, VanSledright (2014) proposes a weighted multiple choice model where students select the best answer from a list that has only one answer that is completely incorrect, but the other possibilities are somewhat correct (p. 59). In this model students would be awarded four points the most correct answer, two points for the next most compelling answer, and one point for the third. This model allows for questions that are at higher levels on Bloom’s Taxonomy and point to the complexity of the discipline itself. In weighted multiple choice questions the prompt is important because the purpose of the question is to assess historical understanding based on the procedures and cognitive strategies that the students have been using in class; for example:

Based on the way the evidence we examined comes together, we can argue that Truman’s primary purpose for dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was to

- a. avoid a costly and perilous ground invasion of the Japanese mainland.
- b. devastate the kamikaze morale and the arsenal of the Japanese air force.
- c. bring the immediate surrender of axis powers to allied forces.
- d. assert American military strength in the face of communist expansionism.

This model of multiple-choice test has the benefit of assessing deeper understanding and can be used in not only a formative manner because it gives information to the teacher about the level of student understanding, but also a summative way because the information could be used to make a judgment about a student’s achievement. While VanSledright is primarily concerned with the diagnostic assessment, the summative aspect is important to teachers who must report on student progress through grades. Here, the weighted multiple choice question could provide teachers an important summative tool that they may use, especially in programs of study that incorporate historical thinking within their standards.

The book also looks at other forms of assessment that are of interest to teachers. Question prompts with documents, interpretation essays, project presentations, verbal reports, and video analysis are considered as methods to corroborate information about student achievement. These other assessment strategies are open-ended and allow students to use evidence to substantiate and contextualize their interpretations.

VanSledright is writing from his position in the United States where accountability rules the day. He is guardedly optimistic that a change in assessment climate may occur: “In order for diagnostic assessment to operate in a large-scale testing culture, that culture in many different ways would need to redefine its attitudes and values regarding the purposes of assessing” (p. 115). The first step in addressing this culture is in the classroom. Teachers need to take ownership of the curriculum and create a classroom assessment environment that promotes thinking and learning with students as partners in their learning (Brookhart, 2003). How might this look in a Canadian context? We can use the example of the imposition of the War Measures Act in order to see a weighted multiple-choice question in action. Primary source material is available through the Virtual Historian website; for example, a possible question might look like:

Based on the evidence we studied, we can argue that Trudeau's primary purpose for invoking the War Measures Act was:

- a. to compensate for the inadequacy of the Quebec Police and the RCMP.
- b. to project power and strength to a scared population.
- c. because of the insufficient powers of the Criminal Code.
- d. because of the threat of a well-armed and co-ordinated FLQ.

A diagnostic question like this opens up a number of avenues for the teacher to take the learning. First of all, it is an easy formative assessment in a ticket out the door scenario or lesson plenary. The question could be used prior to students beginning an argumentative piece because it would help the teacher understand the learning that took place during the lesson. As well, it could also help prepare students in developing a thesis statement or it could set up a discussion over whether or not the implementation of the War Measures Act was justified or not. This book offers ideas for the teacher that wishes to implement an assessment process that promotes deep learning of the discipline of history.

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