

3. Turning Bloom's Taxonomy Upside Down in History Classes

In this thoughtful *Education Week* article, Stanford University professor Sam Wineburg and doctoral student Jack Schneider argue that it often makes more sense to approach Bloom's taxonomy from the top down rather than the bottom up. Here's the usual arrangement:

Evaluation
Synthesis
Analysis
Application
Comprehension
Knowledge

In high-school history, for example, the conventional wisdom is that students need to know their facts before they can make evaluative judgments. "But just as math is about more than learning theorems," say Wineburg and Schneider, "history is about more than collecting facts. It is also a discipline that requires piecing together an accurate story from incomplete fragments. Historical thinkers begin by asking questions, evaluating what they don't know in pursuit of their ultimate aim: knowledge. And then they repeat the process."

As an experiment, they asked Jacob, a student in a private high school who had scored 4 out of 5 on the AP U.S. history exam, to read a document "historically." The document in question was an 1892 proclamation by President Benjamin Harrison declaring "Discovery Day" to honor Christopher Columbus as a "pioneer of progress and enlightenment." It proclaimed that in schools, churches, and other places of assembly, there should be "expressions of gratitude to Divine Providence for the devout faith of the discoverer."

Jacob's reaction (which was typical of other high-school students interviewed) was to talk about the gap between Harrison's description of Columbus as a pioneer of progress and enlightenment and the explorers' greedy motives and torture of natives. "Jacob marshaled background knowledge about Columbus and worked his way toward the Bloomian peak," say Wineburg and Schneider, "eventually challenging President Harrison's praise for Columbus with his own critical alternative... Nice job, Jacob."

But when history graduate students were asked to evaluate the same document, they had a totally different take. It wasn't about 1492 or Columbus, they said. They focused on 1892, the year the proclamation was issued, and asked what Harrison was up to. After some digging, they realized that at the turn of the 20th century, waves of immigrants from Italy and other European countries were flooding the U.S. President Harrison was pandering to these new voters!

"Now *that's* critical thinking," say Wineburg and Schneider. The graduate students didn't have any more historical knowledge about Columbus than Jacob, but they knew what to focus on and what question to ask. "Jacob's reading was critical," say the authors, "but there was little thinking in it. Sure, he brought background knowledge and strong opinions to this document. But he didn't know how to get at the document's untold story. He missed what really mattered."

The history graduate students, on the other hand, started with analysis, the base of Bloom's pyramid. "That's because in history, as in other disciplines, the aim is not merely to collect what is known," conclude Wineburg and Schneider, "but to learn how to think about problems in a new way. Students who think historically know that they need to begin with analysis: What is this? Who wrote it? What time does it come from? And, just as important, they know that their destination – new knowledge – isn't critical thinking's base camp. It's the summit."

"Inverting Bloom's Taxonomy" by Sam Wineburg and Jack Schneider in *Education Week*, Oct. 7, 2009 (Vol. 29, #6, p. 28-29, 31)

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/10/07/06wineburg.h29.html>