They did not pause to wipe their foreheads! Using the C3 Framework to critique arguments in history texts.

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*What is the purpose of social studies texts and how can students and teachers use them? Textbooks themselves maintain a dominant role in classroom instruction. Studies of textbooks suggest their superficial coverage may lead to misconceptions as well as perpetuating existing stereotypes. These misconceptions and stereotypes are not limited to state-issued textbooks. Using a series of educational history texts, we consider the possibility of “supplemental” history texts as sources for critiquing arguments and communicating conclusions, rather than solely as a point of reference for a research report. With the advent of benchmarks like the Common Core Learning Standards and the National Council for the Social Studies' C3 Framework -- both of which encourage students to critique the credibility of authors’ claims, explanations, and sources -- space exists for students to engage with the text as an object of inquiry. In this study, we reflect upon our procedure and findings when analyzing authors’ claims about Chinese laborers’ qualifications to work on the transcontinental railroad, noting that applying the C3 Framework is not limited to the example we identified here and is indeed appropriate for use with a variety of content matter.*

In this study, we analyzed and critiqued arguments presented about the construction of the transcontinental railroad in history texts. This focus was significant for a few reasons. First, a persistent problem with some contemporary history texts is that authors often support claims with only a few minor (and unreliable) accounts. In short, evidence is often anecdotal in nature (Wineburg, 2013). Second, investigating representations of the transcontinental railroad’s construction was appropriate because of its broad presence in state social studies content standards for both middle and secondary levels (e.g., California Department of Education, 1998; New York State Education Department, 1996). Thus, the content matter may be familiar to many teachers, nation-wide. Third, the study situated itself within literacy strategies for critiquing arguments (Barnet & Bedau, 2007; Langan, 2007; Pearson, 2011) because of the elevated importance of literacy-based competencies advocated by state and national educational authorities. Of particular interest here is the application of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) C3 Framework, primarily because it is inquiry driven and “cultivates the analytical and communication skills of students” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013, p. xi).

Dimension Four of the C3 Framework guides this inquiry into history texts’ arguments. Dimension Four has three components: communicating conclusions via arguments based on claims and evidence, critiquing conclusions, and taking informed action (NCSS, 2013, pp. 59-62). The objective was to model the application of “critiquing conclusions” (specifically utilizing D4.4.6-8 of the Framework (NCSS, 2013, p. 61)) regarding arguments made about Chinese railroad laborers. According to the NCSS (2013), critiquing conclusions “…requires an examination of sources, consideration of how evidence is used to support claims, and an appraisal of the structure and form
of arguments and explanations” (p. 61). Drawing upon Dimension Four, this article investigates ways to critique authors’ arguments about the qualifications and abilities of Chinese laborers on the transcontinental railroad. By engaging these texts through inquiry, this study offers insight into process(es) for analyzing several authors’ claims on this subject.

Throughout this study, representations reliant on orientalist thinking persisted in many authors’ arguments. That is, identifying Westerners (U.S. businessmen) as progressive and Easterners (Chinese laborers) as monolithic were underlying assertions as to why the Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) hired Chinese labor. This study does not attempt to answer why such problematic arguments exist, though the findings section contains reflections on possible theories. Instead, the methodology section is instructive for those interested in engaging students in similar analytical strategies. While this study focused on arguments about the Chinese building the transcontinental railroad, the strategies employed in this analysis are applicable and transferable to many topics.

**Methodology**

The decision to apply Dimension Four of the C3 Standards to depictions of Chinese immigrants, in particular, drew upon several understandings. Notably, scholarship reveals that the kinds of prejudices Chinese immigrants experienced on the American west coast similarly (and unsurprisingly) manifested in how authors portrayed them in history texts since the 1880s (Ward, 2007). In Progressive Era San Francisco, Chinese immigrants infamously had to endure the indignities of the Chinese Exclusion Act, while local white leaders also banned these residents from its beaches, fishing industry, and public schools (Loewen, 1999, p. 68). In history texts of the Progressive Era, authors similarly abused the Chinese with their depictions. One text writer of the 1910s noted that the “Asiatics” presented a “race problem,” and the U. S. government possessed the right to “...refuse admission to all whom it may consider undesirable” (Ward, 2007, p. 226). Such an entry signaled a defense of the Chinese Exclusion Act because of the Chinese immigrants’ so-called un-American qualities. Another 1910s text author sketched stereotypical assertions that Chinese immigrants were a monolithic group characterized by unsavory character. For example, this author noted that the Chinese would “…work any number of hours, live on the cheapest food, and dwell in the meanest hovel or in a hole in the ground, and withal he would maintain a smiling countenance” (Ward, 2010, p. 238). Here, the author expects the reader to uphold hackneyed thinking by sweeping all Chinese into a singular, unfavorable description.

Of course, such clichéd, inaccurate, and biased accounts in K-12 history texts have gradually diminished from modern print (Ward, 2007; 2010). However, many problematic claims and descriptions therein remain unmitigated (Loewen, 1995). In fact, a recent study maintains that present depictions of Chinese in popular texts still retain a surprisingly high level of stereotyping (Mungur, 2014). Thus, to investigate this study’s research inquiry (analyzing and critiquing arguments about the qualifications and abilities of Chinese laborers on the transcontinental railroad), examining modern history texts was necessary to determine if these sort of intractable descriptions of Chinese persisted.

A sort-of first methodological step involved identifying texts suitable for analysis. By browsing the teachers’ libraries of two major universities and the children’s history sections of three public libraries, 28 works emerged as candidates for study. The criteria for selection included identifying books with titles devoted to the subject, broadly (e. g, The Transcontinental Railroad: Triumph of a dream [Elish, 1993]), or specifically (Coolies [Yin, 2001]). After identifying these texts, content analysis could begin.
As a broad concept, content analysis is a procedure where researchers can analyze and synthesize large bodies of information into pre-established categories (Krippendorff, 2004). Holsti (1969) defines content analysis as "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages" (p. 14). Content analysis can be used to inspect virtually any field of writing, but it is a standard component of social studies research (Berger, 2000; Marr et al., 2012; Van Fossen & Shiveley, 2003). Thus, content analysis allows researchers to observe how authors made claims and used evidence to support their arguments on a particular topic.

We chose to examine how authors craft their arguments because of the pervasive use of anecdotal evidence in textbook arguments. Wineburg (2013) describes this complication as "not a sophisticated way to make claims about a community" and one that "atrophies our tolerance for complexity" (pp. 28-34). We wanted to identify emergent trends in how authors construct arguments while using the C3 Framework as an investigative protocol. Through the process of evaluation and critique, teachers and students are better equipped to see, articulate, and challenge the presence of stereotypes in history texts.

As content analysis can be guided by deductive overarching questions (Krippendorff, 2004), this study also used pre-established objectives. Drawing on insights from Dimension Four of the C3 Framework, this text study steered itself by three questions:

1. Does the author assume that two or more things are more alike than they really are, thus relying on generalizations?
2. Does the author make a claim about one or a few persons and then apply it to all members of that group, thus relying on anecdotal evidence?
3. Does the author make a conclusion before adequate evidence has been provided, thus assuming an uninformed reader?

These questions guided the case-by-case analysis of each text. Using such a "prefigured technical" approach (Crabtree & Miller, 1992, pp. 17-20) allowed for inquiries to draw specifically from analytical criteria outlined in Dimension Four of the C3 Standards.

During the data analysis part of this study, the use of codes, memos, and clustering helped to organize emergent understandings. In any study, coding requires a researcher to assign words or symbols to represent ideas appearing in relevant literature (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In this study, the terms, "generalizations," "anecdotes," and "uninformed" represented the pre-established criteria used to organize segments of text. If a text's passage was flagged with such a term, that indicated an affirmative response to one of the corresponding questions indicated above. Memos are a short writing effort to articulate trending relationships emerging in the data-coding process (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). For example, the memo of "superhero workers or super-gullible readers?!" linked two different passages labeled with the memo, "uninformed." Additionally, the phrase, "Immigrants as marginal Americans" helped to articulate the relationship between other memo'ed passages inferring that Chinese laborers were anomalies or otherwise exoticized.

Through this process, we grouped each of the coded and memo'ed passages into categories headed by one of the three pre-determined data analysis questions. For clarity and brevity's sake, three texts emerged as exemplars of passages from each category. They are:


With these texts, we used Dimension Four of the C3 Framework to highlight authors’ claims about why Chinese laborers were qualified to work on the transcontinental railroad. The focus on representations about and historical arguments for using Chinese labor to build the transcontinental railroad reflects interest in investigating how representations can be used, intentionally or not, to perpetuate stereotypes of the Chinese. While challenging the presence of stereotypes of the Chinese in texts is not the focus of this paper explicitly, what has driven this work is offering teachers and students a platform to critique and evaluate claims made in texts.

Findings

The findings of this study indicate three themes. The most common arguments involved hasty generalizations, anecdotes, and reliance on an uninformed reader. For each of these findings, we define the specific kind of argument being used, provide a text-based example, and offer a discussion for why the provided passage linked to one of the three themes.

Hasty Generalizations: All Chinese built the Great Wall of China!

A common argument used to explain why Chinese laborers worked for the Central Pacific Railroad relied on hasty generalizations. Langan (2007) defined hasty generalizations as “the precipitous move from true assertions about one or a few instances to dubious or even false assertions about all” (p. 256, original emphasis). Additionally, arguments reliant on hasty generalizations make conclusions without using “adequate evidence” (Pearson, 2011, p. 2). In the analysis of texts, authors most frequently used hasty generalization by suggesting that if someone once lived in China, they were capable of accomplishing engineering feats like building the Great Wall of China.

Consider an example of a middle-school text. In Thompson’s (2014) Building the Transcontinental Railroad, she describes a moment where Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR) financier Charles Crocker instructs foreman James Strobridge to hire Chinese laborers. Crocker’s justification: ancient Chinese built the Great Wall of China, and this generation of Chinese also possess the same skill sets. Thompson (2014) explains:

So in 1865, Crocker spoke with James Strobridge, his construction superintendent, about trying Chinese laborers. More than 25,000 Chinese had come to northern California during the Gold Rush. Strobridge resisted hiring Chinese workers, but Crocker pointed out that the Chinese were willing to [work] for only $25 a month, less than half of what the Irish demanded. They also supplied their own food. “Did they not build the Chinese wall, the biggest piece of masonry in the world?” Crocker asked. (p. 22)

Here, Thompson relies on Crocker’s assumption that because Chinese people thousands of years ago built components of the Great Wall of China, mid-nineteenth century Chinese immigrants in North America were able to replicate those efforts.

Crocker’s argument reveals the weakness of relying on hasty generalizations. The first inquiry inspired by Dimension Four of the C3 Standards asked if the author here assumed that two or more things were more alike than they really were. The answer was yes; the author conflated ancient and contemporary Chinese laborers, thus making hurried generalizations about Chinese abilities.

Other assumptions emerged, as well. First, justifying the Chinese laborers’ ability because of monuments built in their homeland was illogical. Such an assertion was like making the far-fetched comparison that any present-day South Dakotan knows how to carve people’s faces on a mountain
because Mount Rushmore is in their state. Second, Thompson (2014) fails to problematize Crocker's conjecture, and thus she provides tacit credibility to his generalization and faulty association, which groups all Chinese of the 19th century with a select group of Chinese from many centuries ago. Being able to critique such a silence is an essential part of any argument analysis.

**Anecdotes: All Chinese Workers Channel Ancient Knowledge**

In this finding, several faulty arguments reliant on anecdotal evidence emerge. Wineburg (2013) refers to anecdotal evidence as problematic because it relies on a few true accounts to describe all other people within a group or race. In the example that follows, Stein (2012) utilizes such faulty evidence. He argues that Chinese laborers were qualified to work in canyons because some of them might have been familiar with engineering techniques that suspended workers in midair. Using a similar argument as in the first finding, Stein (2014) argues that Chinese workers possessed a special ability to work while suspended from ropes at Cape Horn, a steep bluff in Northern California. Stein (2014) describes:

> At Cape Horn, the Chinese once more came to the rescue of the Central Pacific. Up to this point, the Chinese had been passive in controlling the course of the project...While watching the white crews tackle the cliffs, however, one Chinese leader gingerly approached the construction boss Strobridge. Through an interpreter, he suggested that Chinese workers could do as well at performing these cliff-hanging tasks which, the whites had nicknamed “rock-work.” He explained that in years past, Chinese laborers had built fortresses for warlords along the crevices of China’s Yangtze River. Much of the Yangtze terrain was similar to this great cliff. (p. 51)

In this passage, Stein does not state that these workers actually possess the skill sets that these other Chinese employed. Relying upon the second data analysis question guiding this study, we asked, ‘Was he making a claim about one or a few persons and then applying it to all members of the group?’ He was. Because he presumes that a few contemporary Chinese effectively used ropes during construction in steep terrain, all other Chinese laborers possess this ability, too. Also, he makes the questionable claim that if a few members were “familiar” with this work, all members were able to expertly execute the task. Here, anecdotal evidence reveals one of its weaknesses: familiarity with something does not imply expertise.

**Expected Ignorance of the Reader: Chinese are Super Humans!**

In this final finding, authors used arguments so problematic that existing descriptors articulated by education researchers did not offer immediate explanations (Barnet & Bedau, 2005; Langan, 2006; Pearson, 2011). We settled on the idea that these arguments assumed what Wineburg (2013) referred to as “the ignorance of the reader” (p. 30). For this finding, authors’ arguments contained similarities to the previous two findings, which described the use of hasty generalizations and anecdotal evidence.

Here, however, the authors Buckley and Leacock (2006) and Stein (2014) employ such flimsy generalizations and anecdotes that they seem to assume the reader would believe any stereotypical claims or “evidence.” In the following examples, the authors describe Chinese laborers’ great physical abilities and mental capacities. One passage states: “...The Chinese worked steadily, not pausing even to wipe the sweat off their foreheads” (Stein, 2014, pp. 46-47). Another notes, “They were hard workers, unafraid of the gunpowder used to explode through the mountain granite” (Buckley & Leacock, 2006, p. 26). Only the most compliant reader would believe such unsubstantiated claims.
Here, these authors make claims reliant upon an ignorant reader. After all, only an unquestioning reader would believe that this particular race of workers did not wipe sweat off their forehead or experience fear during explosions. These are hasty generalizations that do not rely on even one fact (for example, one doubts whether these assertions could be true for any laborer).

The findings presented here overlap. However, the conclusions drawn by these authors rely most heavily on hasty generalizations, because this method presents itself in almost all of the 28 texts studied. Additionally, the absence of authors’ critique of historic quotes assists in extending the practice of group generalization; it perpetuates stereotypes of a “monolithic Chinese civilization.” When students are given the space to consider arguments, but specifically to critique the credibility of arguments, the persistence of hasty generalizations and stereotypes is illuminated. Working with students to unpack these arguments is a first step to disrupting these patterns.

Discussion

Effectively employing proven comprehension strategies in K-12 classrooms is an ongoing challenge to teachers of all subjects, not just within the social studies (Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007). While such literacy practices encompass a wide array of topics (e.g., Afflerbach, 2007; Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2007), this study sought to model a single analytical strategy -- examining and critiquing how history text authors craft their arguments. This strategy was embedded within distinctive criteria found in Dimension Four of the C3 Standards.

The methodological orientation used three questions inspired by this framework to guide a reader’s critique of a text author’s argument. After all, studies show that revealing questions after students have read a non-fiction piece is an unhelpful way to get them to think critically about the argument (Pressley, 2006; Block & Pressley, 2007). In fact, asking students to analyze text with a particular question or set of questions during reading “...produce[s] huge positive effects on learning from non-fictional texts” (Block & Pressley, 2007, p. 234). Thus, by researching with deductively established criteria, this study aimed to model a strategy that has been empirically proven to assist young readers’ comprehension.

As noted earlier, this study’s findings are not intended to be particularly instructive regarding how to teach about a specific group, let alone Chinese portrayal in contemporary history texts. As noted in the methodology section, choosing history text authors’ treatment of Chinese workers in 19th century California grew out of an understanding of their systemic mistreatment and mal-representation. After all, choosing Chinese immigrants as a subject grew partially from the need to choose at least one group from history to model the role of the C3 Framework in text analysis.

However, for a teacher or teacher educator hoping to instruct how groups of Asian descent have historically been treated in textbooks, this study offers a few distinctive possibilities. For example, this study used the C3 Framework to address what Goodwin (2010) referred to as “intragroup variance” (p. 3109). Here, Goodwin establishes that ethnic and cultural groups are often far more diverse than the labels affixed to them indicate. Through use of the C3 Framework, readers can challenge several persistent stereotypes about Asians: notably, that they (like all groups of people) “have been assigned many incorrect ‘fixed realities’” about who they are and what their heritage consists of (Goodwin, 2010, p. 3123). Additionally, this paper challenges the arguments set forth that Chinese laborers existed in some sort of “fixed reality” where white Americans were the standard, and all “others” occupied some sort of subpar space (Goodwin, 2010, p. 3124).

Thus, this study at least takes to task what some scholars warned against creating -- a “Universal Oriental” (Goodwin, Genishi, Asher, & Woo, 1997). Such an all-inclusive term acknowledges that Asian-Pacific-Islanders are often swept into a culturally-monolithic set of assumptions, much like the way the “model-minority stereotype” incorrectly and unfairly
perpetuates exceptionally high expectations for Asian-Americans’ classroom performance (Lee, 1994).

By calling out the text author’s sometimes outlandish claims about Chinese railroad workers, this study highlights skills from the C3 Framework that can be used to discredit such incorrect assertions. A cursory glance at what this study accomplished might only glean the idea that these authors made incorrect claims about Chinese laborers. Actually, what this study does do is use the C3 Framework to challenge an oft-repeated false binary about what it means to be an American (Okihiro, 2001). In this study, text authors portrayed railroad workers from China as some sort of exotic “other” -- they were not as human as the other workers of white, European descent.

In fact, by critiquing text authors’ claims in this way, this study also highlights an awareness for teaching about groups of Americans in more inclusive ways. In the passages featured in the findings section, Chinese immigrants appear as outliers in American history. They are not framed as ordinary people who joined other ordinary people to contribute to a common story. Instead, they appear in the narrative only when crises occur, in this case, a significant labor shortage in California during the transcontinental railroad’s construction. And when they do appear, some authors assign them odd qualities, like not fearing explosions. When authors push groups of people into the role of historical sidekick or curiosity, students can use the C3 Framework to problematize such statements. Doing so strives for the sort of education that transforms how students understand history (Banks, 2007).

**Conclusion**

The goal of this study has been to offer possible ways to use history texts as opportunities to critique problematic arguments. Specifically, the findings revealed avenues for students to draw upon Dimension Four of the C3 Framework: Communicating Conclusions. By being able to challenge conclusions, students become better at understanding the components of an effective (or ineffective) argument. They also gain proficiency in identifying damaging claims that define certain members of American history as anomalies (McIntosh, 1983). Methodologically, this study employed several examples of how to apply strands like D4.4.6-8, which invite students to “critique arguments for credibility” (NCSS, 2013, p. 61). Importantly, it models the pre-configured practice of crafting key questions to guide comprehension, an effective method for content-analysis research as well as for middle school and secondary literacy competencies (Pressley, 2006; Block & Pressley, 2010). Further research includes opportunities for comparing the arguments in these secondary history texts with other sources and media (strand D2.His.17.6-8), as well as developing counter-claims (strand D3.4.6-8).

While this study applied the C3 Framework to arguments made about Chinese laborers building the transcontinental railroad, this approach is applicable on almost any topic. It is especially pertinent when a history text casts one group as normative and others occupying some deviant role of “other.” Thus, teachers and teacher educators should consider this study’s approach when their learning objectives include transformative opportunities to analyze and critique arguments about what it means to be an American (Banks, 2008).

**References**


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