How Does a Historian Read a Scholarly Text and How do Students Learn to do the Same?

FRIEDERIKE NEUMANN

CRITICAL THINKING is a core skill for all students of history, and to become successful practitioners students need to learn to read in ways commensurate with the scholarly standards of the discipline. Whilst learning to read scholarly texts constitutes an essential part of this process, there are questions about how far conventional methods of teaching this meet the needs of the majority of students and how the practice of reading can best be supported. This at least is the case with history education in German universities. However, due to the fundamental changes the German educational system has experienced for more than a decade now, programs have begun to be initiated that ask university lecturers and advisors to reflect and develop methods of teaching from a discipline perspective with a very practical twist. At Bielefeld University a program called ‘richtig einstei gen’ (get started well) focuses on supporting students in the first two to three semesters of their Bachelor study program to master the transition to university, a challenge that has occupied history and humanities educators in many countries in recent years (cf. Skinner, 2014; Atherton, 2006; Booth, 2001). One part of the program aims to give students the opportunity to acquire and develop the domain-specific literacy of reading and writing in the discipline(s) they choose to study. Since reading a monographic scholarly study and analyzing it critically is one of the first written examinations history students at Bielefeld University have to take, the work of the ‘richtig einsteigen’ staff in the department of history has focused on supporting students to master this challenge. This article describes demonstrations by two historians of how they approach a monographic study unfamiliar to
them and how students practice in workshops what they have observed. I will start with some remarks about the framework of what is presented and to conceptualizations of reading and teaching reading common in the discipline of history.

Changes and developments in the German educational system

Today high school students in nearly all of the German federal states take a centrally organized examination in order to receive their ‘Abitur’, the major entrance qualification for higher education (Hochschulzugangsberechtigung). In recent years pre-Abitur-schooling has been shortened from 13 to 12 years in the Gymnasien (schools preparing for Abitur) and far more students of a cohort gain this qualification than some decades ago. In this context the group of students entering higher education has been growing and become more heterogenous (Autorenguppe Bildungsbericht, 2014: 91, 93, 119, 125, 133). At the same time the situation of universities has changed considerably. The necessity to procure research funding has grown and competition among institutions has intensified. Simultaneously higher education has changed due to the Bologna Process. Until the middle of the first decade of this century German universities used to offer mainly ‘Magister’ and ‘Diplom’ degree programs. Since then they have adapted to a BA/MA study system. The advantages and drawbacks of these new programs are still being discussed, as is the question if and how many of the students entering universities today are sufficiently prepared and competent to study (‘studierfähig’) and if schools or universities have a responsibility to help them develop these competences (Asdonk, Kühnen & Bornkessel, 2013; Köller, 2013). The financial situation of the universities is also a pressing issue, and this makes the nature of the student-teacher relationship a source of tension. In this situation the federal government in cooperation with the federal states has designed a contract aimed at improving and assuring the quality of teaching in higher education (Qualitätspakt Lehre). Since 2012 Bielefeld University has taken part in the ‘richtig einsteigen’ (get
started well) program in the attempt to give beginner students better orientation and support them in developing discipline-specific literacy.

Reading in the basic courses of medieval/early modern and modern history at the University of Bielefeld

To read scholarly texts on history is a basic activity of all professional historians. It is an indispensable part of historical research and the basis for participating in scholarly discourse. To read scholarly texts on history is something students are asked to do routinely in the course of their studies, be it in order to prepare discussion in class or to write research papers and essays.

At Bielefeld University, the year-long basic courses in medieval/early modern and modern history are the main place in the undergraduate study programs for history majors and minors where students are expected to learn to read scholarly texts on history. These courses are conducted by two lecturers and center around a topic (e.g. ‘politics and religion’, ‘eating and drinking’, ‘history of work – work in history’). It is not easy to fine-tune these courses over time, since teachers are encouraged to establish new courses from year to year and the co-teaching teams often do not remain the same. The courses aim to introduce students to the history of these epochs and the basic methods and means of historians. The module description of these introductory courses allocates to the first semester the task of enabling students to learn – among other things – to read scholarly literature on history. The critical analysis of a monographic study constitutes the written examination demanded at the end of the first semester of the course. Students are expected to demonstrate that they are able to identify a monograph’s central statements and the argumentation, to analyze which primary sources have been used to which end, to see how the author describes the state of research and how she/he positions her/his work in it.

A tutorial led by senior BA or MA students gives students the chance to explore materials, learn the more formal parts of scholarly work and practice work strategies. In regard to reading, tutors
commonly provide tips such as the use of methods like the SQ3R (Robinson, 1962) or advice on how to develop systems of taking notes.

Teachers often express dissatisfaction with the amount, intensity and result of the reading their students do. They find only some students are well enough prepared for class to discuss the texts and to use what they have read for further tasks, and some do not attend regularly since attendance in class is no longer obligatory at universities in Northrhine Westphalia, the state in which Bielefeld University is situated. Students seem to find the required readings too long and too difficult and fail to see the relevance of reading (all of) them. Probably some are overwhelmed with the amount of text and topics they are confronted with, and do not know how to cope with reading articles or chapters that are much longer than they were asked to read in school. It also seems that some students do not find the discussion of scholarly texts in class useful for their learning. Concerning the critical analysis of the monograph, many teachers say that even though quite a few students succeed in summarizing the content, often enough student papers show no differentiation between relevant and irrelevant information or statements, fail to identify central statements and the line of argument, and show little understanding of what kind of text a historiographical monograph is. Commonly the evaluation of the monograph focuses mainly on its style and its readability, not on scholarly aspects (Lehrendenbefragung WS 2012/13).

As staff involved in the history department’s ‘richtig einsteigen’ program, a colleague and I were asked to take over parts of the tutorials. We decided in the winter of 2012/13 to offer workshops that prepare students in the basic courses for the analysis of the monograph they have to write as an exam. These workshops formed an integral part of the course in that they consumed time within the existing tutorial. Later we also started to coach the tutors. What I want to describe here is how we prepare for the workshop in class in cooperation with the teachers, and some elements of the workshop itself.
Scholarly views on reading historical texts

The development of critical reading is a fundamental skill for all humanities students, as Saranne Weller (2010) has pointed out. The starting point of our own work with history students were publications by Sam Wineburg (Wineburg, 2003) and David Pace (Pace, 2004) which inspired us to develop the procedures presented here. Wolfgang Schnotz’s text (Schnotz, 1996) providing an overview of the conceptualization of reading from a cognitive psychology and linguistics perspective helped us to reflect on the results of our experiment. Here reading is understood as the process of mentally (re)constructing a text and at the same time constructing an understanding of that text. There are several theoretical models of how this (re)construction is achieved which I cannot present here in any detail. In most of them it is assumed that cognitive schemes or mental models influence the process of construction. What is already known influences what is perceived and how it is processed. Schemes and models that exist in a reader’s mind frame the interpretation of what is read. What is read is compared and aligned with what the reader already knows. It is inevitable that a person interprets what she/he reads in terms of how she/he interprets and understands the world respectively certain aspects of it already (Schnotz, 1996: 972-982).

It is obvious that professional historians possess different background knowledge than students. But it is noteworthy that even if they have less background knowledge concerning the actual topic, professional historians do a better job reading than the best high school students. Sam Wineburg gained this insight from his research on students and historians reading historical documents. Historians have a far better notion of historical documents being ‘social interactions set down on paper that can be understood only by reconstructing the social context in which they occurred. The comprehension of text reaches beyond words and phrases to embrace intention, motive, purpose and plan – the same set of concepts we use to decipher human actions.’ (Wineburg, 2003: 66-67) So the ways in which historians interact with documents differ greatly from those of students; the experts working out intention, persuasion,
polemic, intended audience’s reactions and more, while students unaware of this, look mainly for information.

My experiment similarly suggests that professional historians do not just have a better notion of historical documents but also a far better understanding of scholarly texts on history than students. Even when they hardly know anything about the topic and are unfamiliar with the period covered, their experience gives them models or schemes that influence how they read, what they select from what they read, and how they make sense of it. In particular their knowledge of genres and their understanding that scholarly historiographical texts report on historical research and try to convince the academic readership of the plausibility of their central statements is an advantage compared to the inexperienced student. So professional historians, as readers aiming at recognizing the quality and findings of a historiographical text, will look for the topic, central claim or statement, research question, main terms used, main group of sources used, some arguments to support the central statements and often also what standpoint is argued against (cf. Pace, 2004: 14-15). And regardless of the content, they will identify much more easily than students pointers and signposts indicating these elements central to most published scholarly work in the discipline.

Recent publications emphasize the importance of prior knowledge, worldview and learning experience for the way in which students construct meaning from texts on history. Porat (2004) observes that readers incorporate new information into their pre-existing ‘cultural comprehension’ of a topic, even if the information itself contradicts their previous interpretation. By restricting the meaning of new information, readers may stick to their pre-narratives of the subject and the world. VanSledright and Afflerbach (2000) show that reading revisionist texts may lead students to question and reconstruct their older interpretation, but this is by no means a given; simply reading new texts is no guarantee of shifting often strongly-held beliefs and assumptions. Middendorf et al. (2014) further emphasize that not only pre-existing worldviews but also procedural preconceptions concerning ‘the nature and function of history’ hinder students from learning to think like historians.
Decoding the Disciplines

As the preceding paragraphs have illustrated, it is important to help students to understand the mental moves historians make in their work (cf. Wineburg et al., 2013). The ‘decoding the disciplines’ methodology is used by Middendorf and Pace to underline the importance of appreciating that studying an academic discipline requires teaching that is aware of the specific ways of thinking and acting in that field. The question ‘How does an expert do these things?’ becomes a pivot for teaching. It relates directly to insights Wineburg has gained from his research on how professional historians read in comparison with high school students and compared to scholars from other disciplines (Wineburg, 2001; 2003). It proceeds from the assumption that experts often take their way of doing things to be so self-evident that they fail to show and explain it to the students sufficiently. Moreover, experts are sometimes hardly conscious of operations and routines that are so familiar to them that they have become habitual.

The Decoding process starts out by identifying major bottlenecks to learning, then finding out what exactly experts would do to master tasks in question, show students how they do it and model tasks that allow them to experience the procedure historians undertake. Students need opportunities to practice these operations and receive feedback. Teachers have to think how they motivate students to stay active in the process of practicing, find out how they can tell if their students have mastered the operations and should share with others what they found out (Middendorf & Pace, 2004: 1-7; Pace, 2012). In the Indiana University History Learning Project these suppositions have led lecturers to identify seven major bottlenecks in the students’ understanding and practice of historical work and to work collaboratively on a curriculum that supports students in developing essential historical skills. (Diaz et al., 2007; ibid., 2008).
German professors demonstrate to students how they begin to read a book

In Bielefeld we took the idea of showing students how an expert does these things literally and asked teachers of basic courses to demonstrate in class how they approach the reading and analysis of a monographic study that is unfamiliar to them and the topic of which lies outside of their field of specialization.

During the first ten minutes of a regular seminar session the class’s teacher waits outside. In this time students are asked to reflect and jot down some notes about how they normally proceed when they read a scholarly text. They are then presented with a set of five monographs, from which they choose one for the demonstration. The topics of these monographs lie outside the teacher’s field of specialization. Then the teacher is asked in. The task is to demonstrate to the class the first fifteen minutes she/he spends with this book, verbalizing what she/he is doing, what she/he looks for and notices, having in mind the need to analyze the book critically, as the students will have to in their end-of-term papers. The filming of these demonstrations impresses on the students that they must follow some important steps in reading a book and it allowed us to produce a video clip highlighting common features of such demonstrations. It shows Prof. Christian Büschges and Dr. Vito Gironda approaching and inspecting a monograph (http://youtu.be/gYYC7zR5XE ). After the demonstration students share their observations and reflect on what they have seen. Finally they give written feedback on the session.

What were the characteristics of these demonstrations? How did the historians asked approach the book they were given? The demonstrations had much in common: They looked at the title, subtitle, at the book cover, already noting key terms and any clues pointing towards the author’s methodological approach. They checked the preface, mainly to see if they were dealing with a dissertational thesis or a habilitation (second book necessary for qualifying for professorship at German universities), and also looking for the social and institutional context in which the author wrote the book. They looked at the table of contents in some length depending on how
detailed it was, noticing what was covered. They started to survey the introduction, explaining that they were looking for certain things: What is going to happen in this book? What is to be shown? What’s new about this book? What new insight does it give? They asked for ‘method’: How are things going to be undertaken? What are the central terms used, saying things like: ‘I note these things, put them to my memory, will see how the author understands and explains these terms.’ In the video Vito Gironda says at one point: ‘Up to page 17 I haven’t found anything I am interested in.’ Shortly after he says: ‘Ah, here it comes. The author claims to want to show [...]’ Now I’m curious to know how he wants to show this and I expect him to explain exactly [...].’ When told that he had only two minutes left Christian Büschges turned from the introduction to the conclusion of the book, saying: ‘I will see if I find some crisp/luscious propositions.’ He then surveyed the last pages and concluded that he was ‘not turned on very much’ by what he has seen.

After the demonstrations the students were asked what things they found significant and to what extent their own way of reading a scholarly text differed from what they saw. Among the remarks made were: ‘I was impressed that Mr. Büschges turned from the introduction directly to the conclusion. I would never have dared that. That would be a no-go reading a novel.’ Another remarked: ‘Up to now I never really paid attention to the introduction of a text. I believe that this will help me to read academic publications more efficiently.’ In the written answers to the question ‘Do you feel reassured in your way of reading?’ many comments pointed out differences between the students’ reading strategies and those of the teacher. A typical observation was: ‘Due to the little experience I have, my way to do it resembles “reading” while Vito rather looks for information he is interested in.’

Student responses to a question about what they wanted to adopt to improve their own way of reading included many saying they wanted to prepare better before starting to read, ask more questions of the text, read more selectively, read introduction and end in order to get a general idea and to know where the book is headed. Not all students mentioned or wrote about transformative insights they
gained. Some simply felt reassured because they already searched for a general idea by studying title, book cover, table of contents and such like or recognized that their existing approach to reading only needed to become a little more systematic. Nevertheless at least half of the participating students (about 60 took part in the demonstrations) wrote that their reading strategies differed from those of the experts. They had become more aware through having the opportunity to reflect on how they read and gain ideas about how to approach texts differently.

Workshops on reading historiographical monographs

How can reading strategies that professional historians practice be transferred into tasks that allow students to improve their own reading? Workshops in Bielefeld in which students start to work on their 'critical analysis of a historiographical monograph' allowed us to experiment with this. These are some of the elements used:

First students reflect on how experts approach scholarly books. Experts investigate title and back cover, year of publication, connect what they read with their previous knowledge, become curious, ask questions, get an ‘overview’ / a general idea of the book, investigate the book for certain aspects or details, want to discover how the monograph is ‘made’ respectively how it ‘works’ (main question, used sources, historiographical approach etc.), what the central hypotheses/ statements are and what arguments the author supplies to support the central hypotheses.

From this students are encouraged to do the same step by step. They are asked to investigate the title: ‘What is the topic? What do you already know about the topic? Can you decide which period of time and which geographical region is covered? What do you already know about this time? And this region? What could be interesting about this topic in this time and space?’ Two students work together investigating the titles of their books.

They are asked to read the book cover: What does it reveal concerning central statements, research question, methodological approach, used sources, etc.? Two students tell each other what they
have found out, what they have understood, what they find remarkable or interesting.

Study the introduction: ‘What are the major parts? What is dealt with in which part and chapter? Do you get an idea of how the parts are connected? What is the common thread that runs through the whole work? Do you get an idea what the author is aiming at?’ Two students explain their findings to each other.

The students discuss what can be expected from the introduction of a scholarly monograph. They receive a handout that says:

What information do authors often give in the introduction of a study?

- About the ‘Thema’ (topic) and ‘Untersuchungsgegenstand’ (subject matter), ‘Themeneingrenzung’ (how the subject matter is narrowed down),
- ‘Fragestellung’ (central questions), ‘Zielsetzung’ (objectives) and hypotheses
- ‘Forschungsstand’ (current state of research), that means it is reported, which studies about the topic already exist and which positions historians have taken so far, what the difference is between their own study and those that have already been undertaken.
- What sources do they want to analyze in order to check their hypotheses?
- Which methodological approach do they use?
- How do they announce the way they will structure their monograph and indicate the steps in which their argument will unfold?
- How do they argue for the relevance of their topic and shed light on their ‘Erkenntnisinteresse’ (cognitive interest)?

Where and how can these elements be identified in an introduction?

Students are shown first sentences of some paragraphs from the introduction of a monograph. This is an example of one set of sentences from Rebekka Habermas (2000), *Männer und Frauen des Bürgertums. Eine Familiengeschichte 1750–1850*:

‘Kocka’s statement that […] hasn’t lost any of its plausibility.’

‘The question […] has still not been answered by research. […]’
‘It’s a mistake not just made by researchers of the bourgeoisie to ignore the discrepancy between […] and […], instead of making it the starting point of analysis. […]’

Question: What does the author describe and discuss in these three paragraphs?

Students survey the introduction of the monograph they have chosen, reading the subheadings, reading the first two sentences of paragraphs. If they find passages that fulfill the functions mentioned in the handout they indicate this through marginal notes. They choose a passage the function of which they could identify, ask an appropriate question, e.g. ‘What is said about the current state of research?’, read the passage looking for answers and take notes which can be transferred into text later on.

In order to prevent students from relying too heavily on reading only bits and pieces of a text, we explain that these steps will help make them aware of the function of paragraphing. The technique of reading the first two sentences of a paragraph should not replace the reading of major parts of a text and should lead to reading with a question in mind.

In order to help students to get an overall view or a bird’s eye view of a study they receive the following figure, an empty one as well as one filled in with the results of the analysis of an article they have discussed in class before, so they have an example of what results using the diagram might produce. We encourage students to place the results of their analysis into the empty diagram or to create a poster that contains the same elements. We explain that these are elements the professional historian will look for if he or she is going to analyze a book critically.

How do students view this process of teaching critical reading? Only a few students complained that they already knew all this. Most, however, found it helpful to undertake the small steps required and to discuss their thinking with others. In their written feedback many participants pointed out that they gained a clearer idea of how to approach the task of critically analyzing the monograph, what to expect from the genre, what to look for and how
FIGURE 3: A historiographical text seen analytically:

Topic: Starting point

Subjects matter:
Regional and temporal limits:

Main question:

Objectives:

Theory referred to:

Claim / central statement:

Method:

Argument 1:
Evidence for argument 1

Argument 2:
Evidence for argument 2

Argument 3:
Evidence for argument 3

Critique:
they could approach the task systematically. In each workshop some students mentioned that they found the figure helpful in enabling them to examine a text from a bird’s eye view.

Even if the better part of the feedback students provided after the workshop is positive, however, we do not know enough about the effect demonstration and workshop have on the papers students hand in. We have not undertaken a systematical assessment of how these strategies helped students to master the task – something that forms part of the decoding the disciplines cycle. But there are some pointers. Vito Gironda, one of the teachers filmed, said that students who did not attend the workshop did not succeed in writing effective papers. One student who did not participate in the workshop let us know twice that she ‘regretted bitterly’ not having attended it, appreciating another workshop she attended.

Conclusion
What conclusions can be drawn from the teaching experiments described above? The practical demonstration of how an expert starts to read a book was positively received by the students and their written feedback showed that many felt they had gained considerable insights from it. The workshop in which the students imitated what the expert does step by step and discussed their experience was also appreciated by most students. They seemed to become more clearly aware that a professional way of reading scholarly texts on history is not just a ‘reading’, but an investigation in which the professional reader uses a certain set of questions and a systematic way of proceeding to inspect a text. We still have to undertake a systematic inquiry into how well students who followed demonstrations and attended the workshops did in their written analysis of a scholarly monograph. It is likely that other obstacles to fulfilling the task remain. The seven steps of the decoding the disciplines approach can, however, provide a useful guiding framework to develop ways to support students to get through these bottlenecks to learning and studying. Concerning the issue of transition we have to learn more about what students entering our institution have done in school,
what kind of texts they have read, and how they worked with them. Furthermore we should find out which ‘procedural preconceptions’ (Middendorf et al., 2014) German students have of history as a discipline and what they expect a scholarly text on history to be, in order better to understand the difficulties they have with the reading tasks. However, to have experts demonstrate how and to what end they work with different genres and to model tasks that allow students to learn to do the same, clearly offers a promising practical way for history lecturers to make a potentially transformative intervention in their students’ learning at a critical point in their undergraduate life.

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