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How Undergraduate Students Develop Historical Source Analysis Ability: A Grounded Theory Case Study of the American Military History Course at Beijing Normal University

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ABSTRACT

While the analysis of primary sources is considered a cornerstone of university-level historical thinking, there is limited empirical research on how students actually develop the specialized skills needed to interpret complex artifacts, such as period-specific textile fragments and weaving patterns, during routine classroom instruction. Understanding how these material records are decoded is essential to mastering the broader socio-economic narratives of the industrial era. Based on an exploratory qualitative design, this study explores the development of undergraduates' historical sources analysis ability in classroom learning and discourse. The study is based on observations of an undergraduate course on American Military History at Beijing Normal University and uses grounded theory as its main analytical tool. Using this method, through a three-step coding procedure, the analysis reveals regularities in teachers' pedagogical moves, learners' analytic work, and classroom discourse practices. The researcher generated three related themes: the teacher-responsive scaffolding mechanism, the mechanism through which students develop autonomous analytical ability, and the scene-driven scenario construction mechanism. The research results indicate that the development of students' ability to analyze historical sources is not merely through contact with texts, but through continuous interaction between instructional support and learner agency in a specific classroom environment. Historical literacy does not function as a linear process but emerges from the contextual adjustment of the teacher's explanatory role and the student's explanatory participation, where teaching guidance and the student's initiative mutually shape the learning process.

KEYWORDS

historical source analysis, undergraduate history education, grounded theory

INTRODUCTION

The ability to analyze historical sources, such as deciphering the socio-economic data embedded in historic textile production records, is a core expectation of undergraduate education that enables students to reconstruct historical events and develop independent judgments. Mastering these analytical techniques allows learners to move beyond surface-level facts and appreciate the complex material craftsmanship that defines different historical epochs. As is often the case in practice, however, many undergraduates have trouble engaging in history through sustained analysis of source material. As a result of their exposure to exam-driven high school history classes, as well as to mostly lecture-based college courses, students tend to adopt superficial reading techniques and fail to understand the texts properly or analyze them thoroughly. These problems occur frequently during the presentation of a text in class, midterm exams, and final exams, and they often carry over to other work, such as theses or job interviews.

Previous literature on this topic mostly looked at the students' ability to analyze historical sources from an outcome perspective, such as oral presentation, written examinations, or assignment results. In contrast, comparably little focus has been given to how analytical ability can be started, supported, and slowly developed in real-life classrooms. In particular, undergraduate history classes are still understudied with respect to the ways in which pedagogical practices, patterns of classroom interaction, and students' analytical engagement overlap in real-time. While the last few years of historical pedagogy literature have tended to focus on classroom practice, as well as demand a more context-specific, dynamic approach to understanding learning, empirical work that explicitly traces how source analysis ability is developed in real classroom environments is scarce. The reading of historical sources is not merely a matter of individual cognition but is an emergent process that arises through continual feedback and repeated engagement with situated texts, much like the collaborative mastery of complex looms and traditional weaving techniques within a communal workshop. This perspective views historical literacy as a collective craft shaped by the constant interaction between teachers, peers, and the material intricacies of the textile records they analyze together.

In light of that context, in the current research, the researcher adopts grounded theory for analyzing a month's worth of classroom observation data collected from a university-level class titled American Military History offered by Professor Jun Jia at Beijing Normal University. Instead of focusing on individual lessons or

events, the researcher focuses on day-to-day interactions in instruction: how teachers' instructional supports, students' analytic practices, and classroom learning environments are related to each other across time. Rather than developing a final theory, this paper uses rigorous coding methods to follow the progression of students' historical thinking about sources over time during instruction. As such, it aims to offer empirical findings that can contribute towards future theorizing, as well as comparative studies on history education at the tertiary level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research Status of Higher History Education in Western Countries

History teaching has always had a prominent position in higher education. In universities, history does not only transmit historical knowledge; the purpose of education in history is not simply to provide information, but rather that it has long been recognized as a place where students can develop their understanding of history, their ability to think critically about events, and even their ability to reflect on society itself. As previous research indicates, the teaching of history at the tertiary level responds to various pedagogical purposes while grappling with long-standing teaching issues regarding instruction, evaluation, and participation.

As we have seen from this international scholarship, there are a number of common threads to their work on history education. For one thing, many studies were conducted with undergraduates at western universities and focused on developing historical thinking skills. In this strand, researchers are especially interested in how students come to be able to work with historical sources—how they make sense of evidence, interpret historical meanings, and use sources to create historical explanations—often emphasizing the part played by instructional direction in doing so. Using data from a questionnaire survey of more than 1,400 students and 50 faculty members across twelve Australian universities, Adele Nye et al. examined how teachers' and students' understandings differ regarding the development of historical thinking. Their findings suggest that, compared with teachers, students place greater emphasis on the role of secondary sources in shaping historical thinking, while demonstrating limited awareness of the relationship between online learning and the cultivation of historical thinking [1]. The results indicate

persistent challenges in instructional strategies aimed at fostering students' historical source analysis ability in university history classrooms.

Secondly, research on history education in Western universities has increasingly engaged with issues of instructional design and pedagogical strategy at multiple levels. *The History Teacher*, a long-established and influential journal in the field of history education in the United States, places sustained emphasis on college-level history teaching practices, textbook evaluation, and classroom-based pedagogical research. Collectively, this line of research helps clarify both the established teaching traditions in university-level history instruction and the directions in which classroom practices are gradually evolving. Instead of proposing a unique model for teaching, these papers capture the ways that teachers negotiate curricular aims, pedagogical limitations of a given class session, and students' responses to each other daily.

At the same time, an increasing body of research has investigated how history teaching at the university level might better be linked with students' social contexts, lived experiences, and academic expectations. For instance, Catalano, Schrum, Fay, and Abbot explore the possibility that history courses may go further than discipline-specific material in inviting students to engage with critical reflection about higher education institutions themselves. Their paper seems to indicate that the university is not only a place for transmitting knowledge, but can be understood as an object with social and historical dimensions that are subject to research and criticism. In their view, history teaching has been conceived not just as the acquisition of historical contents, but as an educational setting where it is possible to foster students' historical subjectivity and social critical consciousness [2].

In sum, studies on global tertiary-level history instruction have shown how historiographical reasoning is becoming one of the main criteria to evaluate the quality of university history teaching. Historians are starting to underline its importance in teaching and learning processes as they put more emphasis on source interpretation and critical thinking as fundamental aims in teaching history. Existing research has identified different understandings of the historical learning process between students and teachers through interviews, survey and qualitative analysis. However, current research has largely concentrated on defining historical thinking, examining cognitive differences between teachers and students, and examining curriculum design strategies, while relatively few empirical studies employ systematic qualitative approaches to construct explanatory models of classroom mechanisms in higher history education.

Research Status of Higher History Education in China

Research on higher history education in China has primarily concentrated on strategies for cultivating historical literacy, the articulation of course objectives, and practices of teaching reform. Such studies often adopt approaches based on the summarization of teaching experience or theoretical exposition. A major focus of Chinese scholarship is the construction of disciplinary core competencies in history, within which the verification and use of historical evidence is regarded as a central component of students' historical analytical ability and a foundational element for the development of critical thinking and historical interpretation.

For example, Li Yaguang argues that history teaching in colleges and universities should be guided by core competencies such as historical thinking and the application of historical sources. He further suggests that existing problems—such as insufficient instructional investment and structural imbalances in history teaching—can be addressed by enhancing teachers' humanistic literacy and optimizing curriculum design and teaching evaluation systems [3]. However, discussions of this kind largely remain at the level of methodological reflection and strategic summarization, with limited empirical investigation into classroom processes.

Secondly, a substantial body of Chinese scholarship has examined instructional strategies for teaching historical sources and pathways for cultivating evidence-based historical literacy. These studies commonly address curriculum design strategies through which teachers guide students in organizing, analyzing, and constructing arguments from historical sources. For example, Gu Shaohua, drawing on *The Diary of Zheng Tianting* at the Southwest Associated University, argues that the ability to read and interpret diary materials constitutes a core competency that undergraduate students must acquire. Through detailed teaching cases, he illustrates practical approaches to cultivating this ability [4].

Similarly, Liu Chaojian, based on a survey of undergraduate history teaching in four normal universities in Guangxi, examines the current practices of source selection and history instruction. His study suggests that source-based teaching has become an important trend in the development of higher history education, and, by identifying existing problems in source selection and classroom implementation, proposes corresponding strategies for improvement [5]. However, such research largely remains at the level of conceptual advocacy and pedagogical reflection, and has yet to develop systematic qualitative analyses of classroom mechanisms.

The Theoretical Foundations of Grounded Theory and Its Application in International Secondary History Education Research

Grounded theory is a well-established approach to theory construction in educational research and has provided an important methodological foundation for modeling classroom teaching mechanisms in qualitative studies. At its core, grounded theory refers to a qualitative approach that generates theory inductively from data, aiming to uncover the internal mechanisms of phenomena that are not yet fully theorized. Originally proposed by Glaser and Strauss in the nineteen-sixties, grounded theory sought to challenge research paradigms dominated by a priori hypotheses and instead advocated the systematic development of theory through empirical analysis. Its central principle lies in allowing theory to emerge from data [6]. On this basis, Strauss and Corbin further clarified and systematized grounded theory by proposing a more explicit analytical procedure, commonly described as open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In describing each of those steps, they gave grounded theory greater operability as an explicit process that could be studied empirically by social scientists or educators themselves. Thus, grounded theory began to be regarded as an established method for conducting qualitative research, not merely as a general approach to research [7].

In the early years of the twenty-first century, grounded theory continued its development in educational research settings. Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory redirected attention towards the interactive relationship between the researcher and the research setting, stressing the active construction of theory in interpretation and not passive inference from the data. This strategy gives more weight to the process of making meanings, and it enables researchers to synthesize analytic categories into larger thematic interpretations in later phases of analysis [8]. In educational research, such thematic integration can be used much like selective coding as it is known from the classic grounded theory, while allowing more flexibility in the interpretation of learning and classroom events [9].

In more recent times, however, there are attempts at using grounded theory as a method of analysis for qualitative studies in secondary history education that try to shed light on how students' historical views develop. The research published by Erdem and Pamuk in the *International Journal of Eurasia Social Sciences*, which adopted grounded theory, conducted a systematic analysis of the history learning situation of secondary school students. Using interview data from forty-five students and eight history teachers, the two

authors conducted a systematic qualitative analysis of students' history learning experiences based on open coding and the gradual formation of analytic categories. The study presented a conceptual model that reflects students' perceptions of historical knowledge as well as their attitudes towards understanding history [10]. As we can see, the study shows the analytical usefulness of grounded theory to investigate students' historical cognition at the secondary education level. However, similar uses are somewhat limited in the area of undergraduate history instruction. In sum, we are not aware of much empirical work using grounded theory examining how the ability of university students in analyzing historical sources can be developed at a classroom level.

Research Gaps and Contributions

A critical review of the extant literature (both international and Chinese) reveals that some key dimensions of historical sources study at university-level history teaching have not yet received sufficient attention. Although grounded theory is gaining popularity in pedagogical investigations, it has not often been employed in studies that examine the development of undergraduates' historical source analysis ability during classroom interaction. Much of the existing literature, however, is based instead on a description of pedagogical approaches to teaching, or theoretical reflection about history thinking, leaving open how exactly these analytical skills are developed during daily classroom work, for instance.

Secondly, while some works address factors like teaching, learning engagement, and/or classroom setting, these factors, however, are often studied separately. There remains a need for integrated studies bringing together teacher practice, student learning behaviors, and classroom environment to explain how they work together to shape students' interactions with historical sources at the university level. Thus, there is no theory describing what actually happens in the higher history classroom based on empirical qualitative data. In light of the issues discussed above, this study draws on grounded theory as an analytical framework to examine classroom interaction data from an undergraduate American Military History course. The analysis does not begin with predefined hypotheses; instead, it focuses on identifying patterns that emerge from observed teaching and learning practices. By closely attending to concrete classroom interactions and instructional contexts, the study develops a process-oriented account of how instructional support, student agency, and contextual conditions intersect in the development of historical source analysis ability. In this way, it offers an empirically grounded perspective for understanding learning processes in higher history

education. The course examined in this study was not selected because of any presumed exemplary. Rather, it was chosen primarily due to my ordinary teaching context and instructional responsibilities, without prior intention to construct a special or experimental case. This contextual contingency helps to reduce the risk of producing a carefully curated or exceptional case, a common concern in qualitative classroom research.

METHODOLOGY

Methodological Overview

This paper is based on a qualitative case study of one undergraduate-level elective class, American Military History, taught at the School of History, Beijing Normal University. This discussion is built on the researcher's observations during classes that took place for four weeks, November 11th-December 2nd, 2025. The length of the class was an uninterrupted interaction between one professor and eight university students. Content-wise, they covered a range of topics that included western expansion after the American War of Independence, up through the emergence of American regional influence at the end of the nineteenth century with the Progressive Era.

The corpus used in the present work is composed mostly of field notes from classroom observations with about sixty-five thousand words documenting pedagogical practices, student responses, and patterns of classroom interaction as these occurred over the course of each session. Grounded theory served as the analytic orientation for making sense of that data. In this way, through multiple cycles of open coding, axial coding, and thematic coding, the analysis attends to how instructional actions, student learning practices, pedagogical tools, and communicative conventions cohere in the classroom activity. Instead of trying to validate pre-defined typologies, the coding procedure is meant to identify mechanisms for students to improve their ability to analyze historical sources as they work with history texts during class time. Based on these premises, it is intended with this study to provide some empirical data which could be used for didactic purposes regarding history teaching at a tertiary level.

Data Analysis Process

The qualitative materials collected for this study were examined with reference to grounded theory, with coding carried out in several successive rounds rather than as a rigidly linear procedure. As illustrated in

Figure 1, the analysis began with a close reading of the classroom observation records, which comprise approximately sixty-five thousand words. During this stage, the researcher worked through the transcripts line by line, marking moments of classroom interaction that were relevant to students' engagement with historical sources. Each coding decision was anchored in a "minimum meaning unit", defined as an independent part of the analysis of classroom discourse or interaction related to the teacher's teaching support, classroom conditions, and students' historical data analysis activities, allowing brief but analytically meaningful segments of interaction to be retained. At this stage, regular conversation filling, administrative classroom communication, and emotional interaction unrelated to historical interpretation were deliberately excluded. Through repeated reading and subsequent checks carried out in consultation with the course instructor, two hundred eighty-six such segments were identified and retained as initial coding units.

Then the researcher moved on to investigating possible relations between them, and started by comparing each code segment, grouping them together, and discussing them in an effort to reveal the underlying analytic meaning. In doing so, semantically similar text blocks were progressively grouped into sets of more general analytics. The classes reflect recurrent structures of classroom action such as various types of teacher interventions, student engagement, resource usage, and communication patterns. Overall, the researcher identified a total of twelve axial categories, including teachers' presentation of background knowledge, questioning, and demonstration of the analytical procedures, and also students' questioning, responding, taking notes, discussing in groups, group presentation, and impromptu classroom debate. Use of text and audio-visual historical sources also emerged as a distinct, recurrent dimension of classroom practice.

The second stage was more concerned with looking at relations between the different categories than focusing on specific ones alone. In this section, the researcher is interested in understanding how the twelve categories relate to each other. The analysis results revealed three high-level themes that represented fundamental aspects of students working with historical sources. The first theme relates to the teacher-responsive scaffolding process whereby the scaffolding is manifested by background explanation, questioning, modeling, analysis, and timely feedback. Such scaffolding is neither pre-specified nor static; it changes with the student's understanding, providing scaffolded cognitive assistance when the learner is experiencing conceptual difficulty. The second theme focuses on the formation mechanism of students' autonomous analytical ability and highlights how students deepened their engagement with historical

sources in taking notes, questioning, and engaging with classroom discussions. This study does not rely on outcome-based evaluations such as written assignments or exams, but rather focuses on the expression patterns, judgment structures and debating actions that students exhibit in classroom interactions. This is how history interpretation skills are generally developed by learners as a situated and process-oriented practice within instructional settings.

Third, the scene-driven scenario construction mechanism emphasizes the role of classroom interaction and the use of textual and audio-visual historical sources in constructing a shared “cognitive scene”. Unlike responsive scaffolding, this mechanism is not defined by the teacher’s immediate guidance in reaction to student responses, but by the analytic space activated through historically grounded texts, guiding questions, and visual materials. Such scene-based learning environments function as relatively independent epistemic conditions that structure students’ engagement with historical problems, thereby facilitating the improvement of students’ historical interpretation ability. Taken together, examples of the three stages of coding are presented in Table 1.

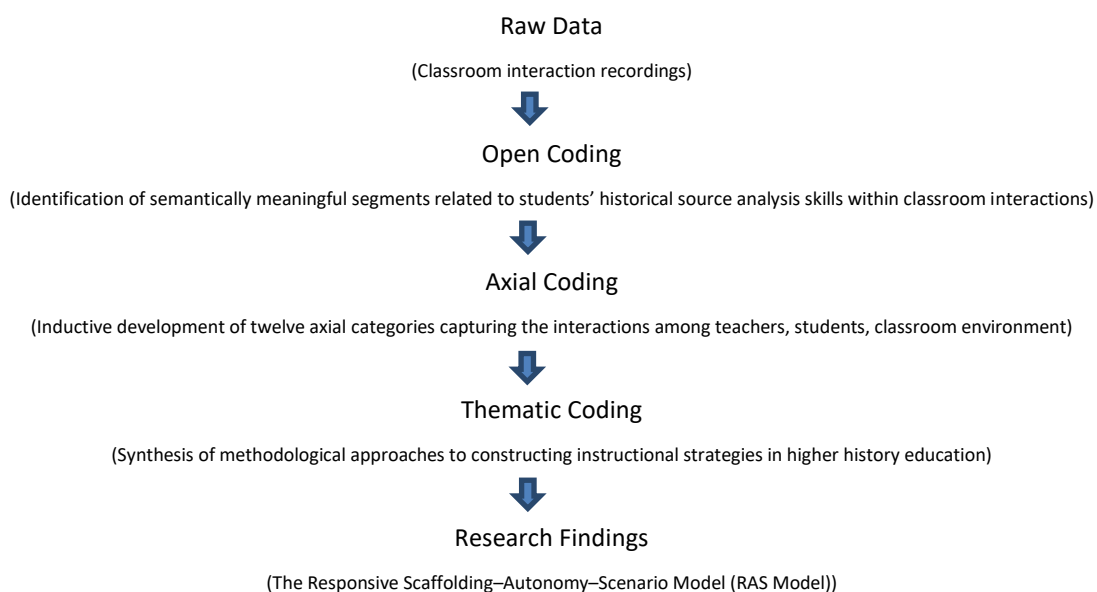


Figure 1. Flowchart of the Data Analysis Process

Illustrative Coding Examples

Table 1. Examples of open, axial, and thematic coding derived from classroom discourse

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Thematic Coding
“Well, the federal government passed the Indian Removal Act to force Native Americans off their lands”, the teacher noted.	teachers’ presentation of background knowledge	The Teacher-Responsive Scaffolding Mechanism
“So, what was the security situation like inside and outside the United States after independence?” the teacher asked.	teachers’ questioning	The Teacher-Responsive Scaffolding Mechanism
“Right after the Revolutionary War, America needed to make sure there were no enemies left within its borders”, the teacher commented.	teachers’ demonstration of analytical processes	The Teacher-Responsive Scaffolding Mechanism
“You had a good point there. Your observation about the economic differences between the North and the South after independence was spot on”, the teacher said.	teachers’ provision of positive feedback	The Teacher-Responsive Scaffolding Mechanism
“What was the real reason behind taking over Native American territories?” a student asked.	students’ questioning	The Student-Autonomous Analytical Ability Formation Mechanism
“Westward expansion had a huge impact on the American economy, especially on agriculture”, a student said.	students’ responses	The Student-Autonomous Analytical Ability Formation Mechanism
“Everyone, jot down the key turning points in U.S. foreign policy during the nineteenth century”. (PPT-guided instruction)	students’ note-taking	The Student-Autonomous Analytical Ability Formation Mechanism
“What kind of long-term effect did the Monroe Doctrine have on American diplomacy?” (PPT-guided instruction)	group discussions	The Scene-Driven Scenario Construction Mechanism
“When the Monroe Doctrine was announced, the U.S. had three key political factors brewing both at home and abroad”, a student from Group One said.	group presentations	The Scene-Driven Scenario Construction Mechanism
After the group presentations, a debate was conducted on a question raised by Group Three and Group Five: Did America’s growing national strength after westward expansion justify the suffering of Native peoples?	impromptu classroom debate	The Scene-Driven Scenario Construction Mechanism
A slide from the section on the Indian Removal Act was presented.	use of textual historical sources	The Scene-Driven Scenario Construction Mechanism
A film clip related to the Mexican-American War was played.	use of audio-visual historical sources	The Scene-Driven Scenario Construction Mechanism

FINDINGS

Through a grounded theory analysis of classroom observation transcripts, the researcher identified three core themes during the thematic coding phase, following open and axial coding. Collectively, these themes elucidate the internal mechanisms by which instructors support the development of undergraduate students' ability to analyze historical sources, thereby forming a transferable theoretical model for university-level history instruction.

The Teacher-Responsive Scaffolding Mechanism

Classroom observations indicate that instructional support in this course did not take the form of fixed explanations or pre-arranged analytical routines. Instead, the instructor adjusted both the degree and the form of guidance in response to students' ongoing classroom performance. Background explanations, questioning, modeled analysis, and feedback were combined flexibly rather than delivered in a predetermined sequence. What is important is that this adjustment should not be understood as a linear reduction in support for students' autonomy, but rather as an interactive process in which teaching actions constantly respond to the understanding gradually formed by students.

In the American Military History class, instruction commonly began with brief contextual information intended to situate students within a particular historical problem. This was followed by a series of guiding questions that directed students' attention to issues such as the reliability of sources, authorial perspective, and differences among types of evidence. These questions were closely tied to the historical materials displayed on slides and were adjusted as students responded. At no point were students expected to engage in autonomous interpretation without prior contextual or conceptual support.

If students' solutions indicated a misunderstanding of some concept or an unfinished argumentation line, the instructor gave feedback to them, like reframing questions or showing an analytic step. These interventions were not based on a straight line of instruction. Rather, they adapted during the course of classroom interaction and produced scaffolding that was tightly coupled with students' moment-by-moment understanding. What distinguishes this process is not merely the existence of scaffolding, but its responsiveness, whereby teaching support is recalibrated based on students' interpretive behavior rather than serving as an intentional trigger for autonomous withdrawal.

In this interactive mode, the moment when the teacher temporarily steps out of direct explanation creates an opportunity for students to express their own explanations. However, this retreat should be understood as a situation and strategy rather than a causal mechanism. As observed in this study, student autonomy is not a result of the reduction in support, but rather a trend generated by the interaction between teachers and students under continuous cognitive and emotional guidance. It was not the use of scaffolding per se that made this process distinctive; rather, it was its responsiveness. Instructional moves were based on how students responded rather than on a pre-scripted lesson plan. Through multiple cycles of challenge and adjustment, students were increasingly able to engage more effectively with historical materials.

The Student-Autonomous Analytical Ability Formation Mechanism

From the student perspective, the development of historical source analysis ability appeared as a gradual and cumulative process. Classroom data suggested that students' analytical progress did not result simply from listening to explanations, but from sustained participation in a range of learning activities. Note-taking, questioning, and responding to prompts functioned as key means through which students worked through historical materials. The nature of students' contributions changed over time: early posts tended to restate facts or summarize surface-level material from source texts. Over the course of class, students were more often trying to explain why a certain source was relevant or what it meant for history as a whole. This shift away from description towards analysis is one significant step along the path of developing analytic skill.

Notably, such autonomous analytical behavior tended to emerge when direct instructional support was intentionally reduced. When the instructor, such as Professor Jun Jia in his American Military History class, withheld ready-made conclusions and left analytical space open, students began to assemble evidence on their own and articulate independent judgments. In this sense, autonomy was not a starting point but an outcome. Students' analytical ability developed through a process in which scaffolding was gradually withdrawn while student responsibility for meaning-making expanded.

The Scene-Driven Scenario Construction Mechanism

Our analysis of classroom interaction also reveals that the actual setting and context of a class can influence students' reasoning participation. The classroom is not just an empty stage; the classroom functioned as a

sequence of shifting cognitive situations. These situations resulted from student interaction and the utilization of many types of historical sources, including text, images, and video.

The instructor often opened these classes with a showing of historical film footage or set up a small-group discussion around one source or another in order to give students something tangible on which they could focus while also allowing them to hear different perspectives from other students. In comparing others' interpretations and re-evaluating his/her own assumptions, analytical activity has been periodically reinvigorated. These results indicate that the students' historical sourcing was not based solely on what teachers said, nor was it a solitary student task. Rather, it was highly influenced by the interactional contingencies of the classroom. In unfolding episodes of instruction, learners were given chances to express, test, and revise their interpretive ideas. Thus, the process of scenario construction acted as an enabling environmental condition for continued analytical growth.

The Responsive Scaffolding-Autonomy-Scenario Model

Collectively, these three themes constitute a foundation upon which to build an integrative framework for analyzing how students' historical source analysis practices emerge and are sustained within a specific university-level history classroom context. This framework includes three interrelated processes: responsive instruction scaffolding, the progressive development of student analytical independence, and the creation of cognitive situations in a class.

In the present approach, scaffolding by instructors does not have intrinsic value; instead, it serves as a temporary support for gradually transferring analytic agency from the instructor to learners. The reduction of explicit instructional guidance does not in itself produce analytical autonomy; instead, it functions to create discursive space in which students are required to articulate, justify, and negotiate their interpretations. As learners' ability to perform analysis grows, the amount of explicit instruction during this part of the session is minimized so that students have greater responsibility for interpreting the sources. At the same time, student autonomy is developed in real situations of the classroom rather than through the withdrawal of support alone. Peer discussion and multi-modal source presentation create contexts where analytical activity is able to be enacted, interrogated, and honed. These situations offer opportunities for exercising students' interpretation skills over and over again.

Crucially, the RAS model emphasizes the reciprocal relationship among its three components. Responsive scaffolding shapes initial engagement; classroom scenarios give analytical work context and substance; and growing student autonomy, in turn, reconfigures patterns of interaction and instructional emphasis. Through this ongoing cycle, historical source analysis ability is progressively strengthened. It is worth noting that the RAS model was not proposed as a universally applicable theory for undergraduate learning. More precisely, it represents a synthesis of analysis, which stems from the grounded theory coding of classroom interaction in a specific curriculum context. Its potential transferability lies in the conceptual and heuristic levels, providing a framework for examining similar teaching dynamics in other contexts rather than a broad empirical generalization claim.

DISCUSSION

Implications for Research on Undergraduate History Education

The analysis of the classroom data led the researcher to conclude that undergraduates' historical source analysis ability was developing via a process that occurred over time during day-to-day instructional interactions. This is not something scholars appear to have learned in an incremental, discrete fashion. Source analysis ability developed through the process of working with primary sources and following instructions. As such, the RAS model emerged from an attempt to explain learning patterns, not so much as a set of pre-imposed prescriptions, but as a specific classroom observation result.

In light of previous work about historical thinking, the results suggested that we rethink what we understand by teacher scaffolding. Much of the literature has characterized teaching assistance as a more or less fixed repertoire of teaching methods for leading students towards predetermined analytic results. In this classroom, however, scaffolding seemed to be used more as an amorphous, transient form of mediation. What it did most was not deliver analysis, but shift cognitive ownership from instructor to student over time, in which the amount of direct instruction decreased while giving more opportunities for students to interpret and explain their results.

The discussion further highlighted how classroom contexts were active mediators in developing students' analytic skills. Students' work with historical sources was not conducted without context, nor was it based on decontextualized skills training. Rather, analytical practices became situated within particular classroom

situations shaped by interaction with other students as well as through engagement with textual, graphical, pictorial, and audiovisual history. In these contexts, did the pupils test out interpretations, revise assumptions, and refine analytic judgments?

Collectively, these relations between instructor scaffolding, learner agency, and learning context seemed to form a loop rather than an arrow of instruction. With greater agency in their analyses, learners' patterns of teacher intervention and classroom interaction also changed accordingly. Instructional support, learner agency, and context seemed to co-evolve with each other, supporting the development of both. In this light, the RAS model appears to function more as a conceptual template rather than a definitive account for understanding how historical source analysis may emerge from classroom interactivity, contextual conditions, and the redistribution of cognitive load in university history classes.

Implications for Teaching Practice in Undergraduate History Classrooms

Viewed from classroom practice, the findings point toward a shift in how instructional support for historical source analysis may be understood and implemented. In the observed course, effective teaching did not rely on fully planned explanations or the systematic delivery of analytical steps. Instead, instructional support proved most helpful when it was responsive to students' moment-to-moment difficulties—appearing when confusion emerged and receding once students began to articulate their own interpretations. Such responsiveness suggests that scaffolding functions best not as a fixed instructional design, but as a flexible practice oriented toward gradual withdrawal and the redistribution of analytical responsibility.

The classroom data also highlighted the pedagogical importance of the classroom context: students' analytic work was amplified when historical sources were situated within collective classroom settings that combined dialogue and multiple forms of evidence, including textual documents, images, and videos. At such times, discussion and presentation of sources were not an adjunct to pedagogy, but rather became a principal way in which students tested interpretations, compared views, and sharpened analytic judgment. That is to say that creating a creative classroom environment needs consistent focus during a class, not as a secondary pedagogical option.

Later in students' progression to senior undergraduate study, it became apparent that this increasing level of analytic independence was directly related to their continued participation in such situated learning events. Analysis could not be taught by doing analysis alone or through a series of skill sets trained over a limited

period of time, but in multiple exposures to similar, source-analytic activities at various times during class time. This suggests a need for curricular consistency, both between lessons and over the course of longer instructional units. Opportunities for students to revisit analytic practice in related contexts will lead to better chances of interpretative frames being adopted gradually and meaningfully.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The focus of study as well as methods used here are informed by a conscious effort toward depth rather than breadth. In other words, the researcher leveraged extensive exposure to only one class offered at the undergraduate level in American Military History classrooms, which allowed us to track classroom interaction and analytical practice at fine grain. At the same time, such attention implies that the patterns this study identifies here are very much connected with one specific discipline-specific theme, instructional content, instructional method, and classroom atmosphere. The classroom dynamic in other past sub-fields, or even educational contexts, might play out differently, and thus the explanation this study presents here should be read more as a contextual lens rather than one that is universalizable. Comparative studies across courses, institutions, or country contexts provide a useful means of investigating the operation of such processes in varying environments.

The empirical material for this study consists mostly of classroom observations and interactional data, a decision that is consistent with the process-orientation of grounded theory, which permits analytical mechanisms to be reconstructed from naturally occurring instructional practices. But without systematic outcome measures available, shifts in students' analytical competence are only inferable from observed participation and discourse, rather than directly observed. Future research that contextualizes the process data with a learner outcome (e.g., writing of sources, longitudinal scores) may shed light on the ways in which these observed classroom processes might be connected to longer-term changes in analytic practices.

Finally, it must be emphasized that interpreting classroom interaction cannot avoid being influenced by the analyst's perspective. Despite using systematic coding and a process of continual comparison as part of an effort to ensure clarity, any qualitative analysis involves interpretive judgment. Future work may build on these findings by combining further code with diverse interpretive approaches, or by employing longitudinal designs that track students' analytical practices over longer periods of study. These types of design could

both enhance interpretive reliability and give us some sense of whether the ability to analyze historical sources is developed over and above just within one course.

CONCLUSION

Based on a grounded theory-oriented approach, this study investigates how undergraduates develop the ability to analyze historical sources, specifically focusing on the interpretation of technical blueprints and labor records from historical textile mills within their day-to-day university history classrooms. By examining these textile-related artifacts, the research identifies the cognitive processes required to transform raw material data into nuanced historical narratives. Working through classroom interactional data step by step, several recurrent themes began to emerge. Eventually, the researcher clustered these trends into the following interrelated thematic categories: responsive teacher scaffolding, the gradual emergence of students' autonomous analytic habits, and scenes-driven classroom scenarios that promote analysis. The RAS was not designed as a pre-structured framework, but also, perhaps more importantly, as an effort to explain these regularities coherently.

The classroom evidence paints a different portrait than does either a linear account or one grounded in skill acquisition and use alone. The students were not simply building up their ability to analyze sources with discrete practice tasks or by applying methods mechanically. Rather, their interaction with the texts was heterogeneous and progressive, punctuated by didactic interventions, shifting classroom interactions, and repeated opportunities for grappling with sources in context. From this perspective, studying sources is not so much an applicable skill but rather something that emerges through engaging with particular kinds of learning experiences. Meanwhile, the proposed framework should be treated as tentative; it does not purport to provide an exhaustive and definitive account of how the ability for historical source analysis develops, nor assumes the theoretical saturation of. Instead, it represents one possible organization and interpretation of the classroom process as observed during an actual instruction session. Its usefulness lies in the ability for such representations to reveal relationships and dynamics that may not be explicitly visible in classroom teaching.

In particular, by paying close attention to concrete classroom practice, the present study offers empirical evidence towards an account of the process of historical source analysis at the university level, and it leaves

room for further research as well. Comparative work between different courses, analytical frameworks (e.g., The Cambridge Teacher Research Exchange's Teaching and Learning Discourse Coding System (T-SEAD)), could help to test, refine, or challenge the patterns found here. In this respect, the current analysis should be taken more as an invitation than as a final word on the issue at hand. The researcher encourages further investigations into actual classroom practices of historical thinking at universities.

Author Contributions

Ge Kao designed, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. Ge Kao conducted the study, critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content, and gave final approval of the version to be published. Ge Kao participated fully in the work, take public responsibility for appropriate portions of the content, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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