

## TEACHING HISTORICAL LITERACIES

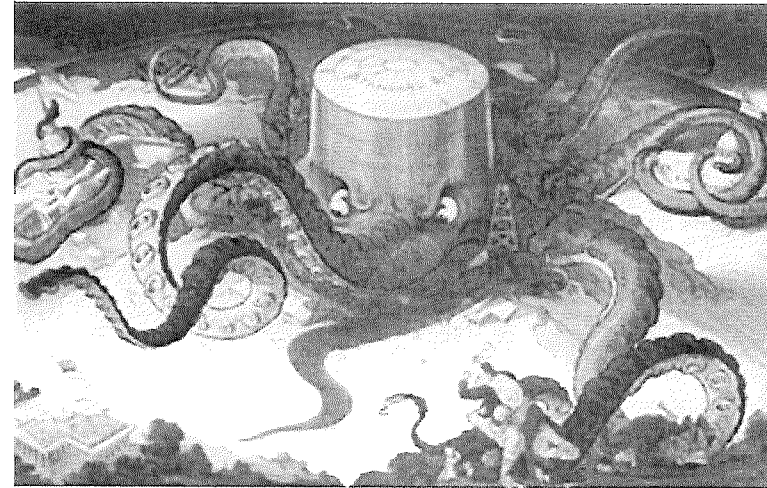


FIGURE 3.1 A political cartoon.

Source: Keppler (1904).

Mr. Ngyuen, a history teacher who usually relies on traditional instructional methods, is teaching a lesson on progressivism in his 8th grade U.S. history class. He wants to lecture on Theodore Roosevelt's trust busting policies, but he decides to start class by having students spend a few minutes analyzing a political cartoon from that era. He does some searching and finds the perfect political cartoon: an image painted in 1904 of an octopus-like monster, labeled "Standard Oil" with tentacles wrapped around a statehouse, other government buildings, and business executives (see Figure 3.1). The monster's eyes are fixed on the White House and a tentacle is reaching in that direction (Keppler, 1904). Mr. Ngyuen is excited by his discovery of this cartoon because it is a wonderful primary source that shows the fears of proponents of Theodore Roosevelt's trust busting. He hopes that during the analysis of the cartoon students will become curious about the conditions that existed at the time and will focus better during his lecture on Roosevelt and the Progressive Era.

When class starts Mr. Ngyuen displays the cartoon using a projector, asking the students to analyze it. There is a long silence, but since he knows the value of wait time, he waits. After a minute of quiet he calls on Joey to describe his analysis.

"I think it shows a monster trying to take over America," Joey answers.

"Would anyone like to elaborate on Joey's observation?" Mr. Ngyuen questions.

"Yeah, it's an octopus monster," adds Carly, "with mean looking eyes."

"Good observations. What do you think the message of this political cartoon is?" Mr. Ngyuen tries to push the discussion into deeper analytical responses.

"Watch out for octopuses," replies Isaac.

"Actually, octopi are really not dangerous," Caleb offers, in correction.

Mr. Ngyuen attempts to refocus the discussion. "This painting is an example of a political cartoon. Does this help with your analysis? It was painted in 1904."

"I never understand those things," complains Carly. "My dad really likes them but I don't get 'em."

Joey jumps in to help. "Since the octopus has 'Standard Oil' written on it, I think it's supposed to represent 'Standard Oil' – so the message is that Standard Oil is attacking America. But I don't know what Standard Oil is."

"Standard Oil is destroying America. That's the message," agrees Mandy triumphantly.

"By polluting the oceans – ruining octopus habitat," Isaac adds.

"What leads you to think that the political cartoon is talking about the environment?" probes Mr. Ngyuen.

"Standard Oil is an oil company and that's what oil companies do – destroy the environment," Isaac explains.

Already the discussion has taken longer than Mr. Ngyuen intended, cutting into his lecture time. "Well, not exactly. Let's back up a little. Joey was right. The octopus represents Standard Oil, which was a large and powerful oil company beginning in the late 1800s. The political cartoon shows Standard Oil Company reaching out toward the White House in an attempt to gain political control over the president. In the early 1900s . . ." Mr. Ngyuen continues to explain the political cartoon to the class and makes a transition into the lecture that will take the rest of the class period.

After class, Mr. Ngyuen reflects on how poorly his introduction using the political cartoon went. He had found a great text, provided time for students

to reflect, and asked open-ended questions. Why did Joey, Carly, and Isaac take the meaning of the cartoon so literally? Maybe the students just didn't have enough background knowledge. But he remembered that later Isaac used his background knowledge inappropriately – reading ideas about habitat destruction into the cartoon when there was no evidence to suggest that was its message. He wonders whether what Carly said is true: these students just can't read political cartoons. He comes up with a quick solution before his next class starts. "I will just explain it to them at the start of my lecture rather than waste the first part of class again."

Even if his students could "read" the political cartoon, there are other historical literacies that the class doesn't use. For example, why didn't any of the students ask who had produced the painting? They didn't seem to wonder much about the context of its creation, its intended audience, or its historical impact. They didn't ask about other documents or artifacts that might corroborate its message or ask to see contrasting opinions. In short, they weren't behaving much like historians. Neither Mr. Nguyen nor his students used the cartoon as historical evidence, but instead viewed it as a way to transmit or receive information. He wanted students to "read" it because it was part of the narrative he was going to give them during the lecture. There was no intent on his part to encourage students to question or critique the political cartoon, to consider its source, or to synthesize its message with other primary sources.

An observer of Mr. Nguyen's class would see that simply providing students with the right text, which Mr. Nguyen did, is not enough to build historical literacies. Students must be taught strategies for working with texts. And, more importantly, students need opportunities to independently develop evidence-based historical interpretations. They need to use historical texts and artifacts, like the political cartoon, not simply to gain information, but as one of multiple pieces of evidence to interpret historical controversies. Further, Mr. Nguyen's students did not know how to comprehend the cartoon, a prerequisite for analyzing it, and he didn't know how to help them comprehend or critique it. He didn't consider how to break down the process of analysis into simpler steps that his students could do. His troubles stemmed from the fact that he didn't think about methods of building his students' historical literacies. He, like me in my early years of teaching, resorted to reading the document to his students rather than helping them read it for themselves.

In this chapter I explore how research on reading and literacy and on teaching reading in the traditional sense (i.e. instruction on reading words, sentences, paragraphs, and books) can inform instruction on building students' historical literacies with both traditional and non-traditional texts. I consider a) general literacy strategies and historical literacies, b) a framework for understanding literate processes and historical literacies, c) two models of literacy instruction, and d) warnings about the potential misapplication of general reading research to building students' historical literacies.