



Text-based Learning and Reasoning: Studies in History

Charles A. Perfetti, M. Anne Britt, Mara C. Georgi

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History is both an academic discipline and a school subject. As a discipline, it fosters a systematic way of discovering and evaluating the events of the past. As a school subject, American history is a staple of middle grades and high school curricula in the United States. In higher education, it is part of the liberal arts education tradition. Its role in school learning provides a context for our approach to history as a topic of learning. In reading history, students engage in cognitive processes of learning, text processing, and reasoning. This volume touches on each of these cognitive problems -- centered on an in-depth study of college students' text learning and extended to broader issues of text understanding, the cognitive structures that enable learning of history, and reasoning about historical problems.

Slated to occupy a distinctive place in the literature on human cognition, this volume combines at least three key features in a unique examination of the course of learning and reasoning in one academic domain -- history. The authors draw theory and analysis of text understanding from cognitive science; and focus on multiple "natural" texts of extended length rather than laboratory texts as well as multiple and extended realistic learning situations.

The research demonstrates that history stories can be described by causal-temporal event models and that these models capture the learning achieved by students. This text establishes that history learning includes learning a story, but does not assume that story learning is all there is in history. It shows a growth in students' reasoning about the story and a linkage -- developed over time and with study -- between learning and reasoning. It then illustrates that students can be exceedingly malleable in their opinions about controversial questions -- and generally quite influenced by the texts they read. And it presents patterns of learning and reasoning within and between individuals as well as within the group of students as a whole.

By examining students' ability to use historical documents, this volume goes beyond story learning into the problem of document-based reasoning. The authors show not just that history is a story from the learner's point of view, but also that students can develop a certain expertise in the use of documents in reasoning.

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