

According to Whom? Helping Students Analyze Contrasting Views of Reality

The ability to detect bias and distortion is critical for all students. Effective instructional models are available, but teachers need the time, materials, and support to implement them.



Students can experience contrasting views through photographs before they read about them. The teacher gives different "sets of information" to each half of the class: one set emphasizes hunting and activities in which men appear to lead, the other set focuses on strong, active women.

As the class discussion about changing sex roles became more heated, David asked, "But haven't men *always* dominated women?" Once again I was reminded of the complexity of many questions raised in our classrooms. My answer took the form of more questions. "What do you mean by dominance?" "According to whom?"

The controversies over Margaret Mead's studies in Samoa are only the newest and best publicized examples of the difficulties researchers face describing social relations in one society. Consider how much more difficult—some would say impossible—it is to establish the kind of cultural universals to which David referred. Superficial and stereotypical generalizations are abundant in our textbooks. If we want to help students develop into critical and reflective thinkers, we need to let them in on complexity and help them find ways of dealing with it.¹

According to several recent reports, only 1 to 10 percent of classroom time is spent on analysis of information.² Unfortunately, even when discussions of issues do occur, students frequently arrive at a stalemate, unable to transcend their conflicting assertions about a difficult question. Ennis, Norris, O'Reilly, and others have developed frameworks for helping students better assess the quality of observations and generalizations in science, social studies, and daily life.³ In all of these frameworks the issue of bias or distortion plays an important role. The *frame of reference* model described in this article gives students and teachers an opportunity to focus on bias by learning to identify the differing assumptions and value systems that give rise to conflicting testimony and interpretations. By examining the reasons behind contrasting reports about the same culture, event, or situation, students can learn to reflect on the ways an author's frame of reference influences the questions the author asks, the evidence gathered, and the conclusions drawn. In the process students examine their own frames of reference, focusing on the ways in which *they* filter information and approach judgments.

Most high school courses present students with a plethora of concepts and generalizations. If students are not

made aware that they were developed by people with their own biases and frames of reference, a danger exists that students will come to accept most premises uncritically as common knowledge rather than as tentative statements about reality. Although students may be more comfortable with the certainty of "right answers," research on the frame of reference model and related approaches suggests that students are also excited about the challenge of detecting the ways in which statements or generalizations may be incomplete, inaccurate, or in some other way misleading. When they are presented with a scientific controversy, conflicting accounts of a historical event or a particular group of people, or contrasting interpretations in art or music, students become much more actively involved in trying to understand the information presented than they do when listening to "one-fact-after-another." Students also start developing the capacity to construct complex, fluid images of people and situations, rather than the simplistic, static portraits so often depicted in the media.

The frame of reference method is adapted from Henry Giroux's writing-history model.⁴ A year after Giroux wrote about his model in *Social Education*, a group of 21 elementary and secondary school teachers worked with him, several sociologists and anthropologists, and me to enlarge their awareness of different theoretical frameworks in the social studies and to develop materials that would help

their students deal with conflicting data and ideas arising from authors' divergent frames of reference. Since then many other teachers in a variety of disciplines have been introduced to the model through courses and workshops sponsored in part by the Critical and Creative Thinking Program at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. The teachers' experiences and their students' reactions to the model have important implications for curriculum development, school organization, and teacher education.

The Frame of Reference Model

The frame of reference model is based on a conception of the relationship between an author's frame of reference and what he or she writes (see fig. 1).⁵ The model links the subject a person chooses to study and the kinds of information the person considers to be relevant to his or her belief and value system. The interests embedded in that system influence a person to focus on some things and to discount others.

In Figure 1, "set of information" refers to the types of studies an author or artist considers to be important to his or her field of interest. For example, sociobiologists consider the study of animal societies to be valuable in learning about the forces underlying human behavior. Most cultural anthropologists argue that such studies do not help us understand the important aspects of human modes of behavior, which grow out of what they see as a

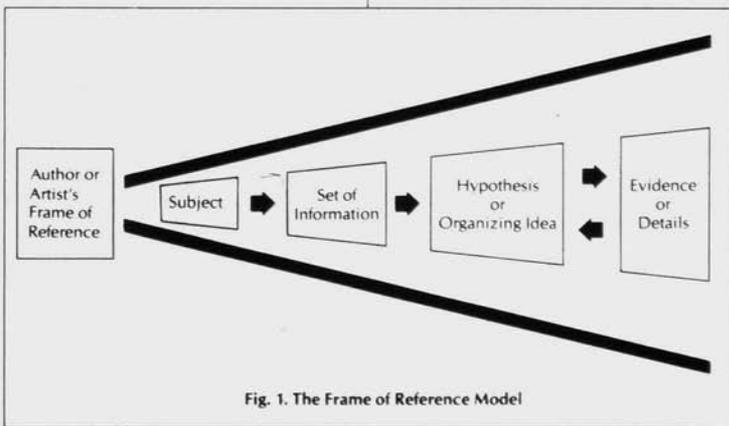


Fig. 1. The Frame of Reference Model

“Students need to realize that the process of doing research involves reflective self-examination on everyone’s part, and that their own biases, not just those of published authors, need to be scrutinized.”

uniquely human invention: culture. These differences in what is considered relevant information develop from the contrasting theoretical frameworks and life experiences of the social scientists. As Kuhn has pointed out, such differences occur in the “hard” sciences as well.⁶

The set of information a researcher uses in turn influences the types of hypotheses he or she will develop. For historians and others working in arts and humanities these “hypotheses” are more often called organizing ideas, thesis statements, or themes. Some hypotheses or organizing ideas may never be considered by a researcher because the set of information used is not conducive to raising certain possibilities. For example, sociological investigations that use “reputational studies”—asking people’s opinions—to locate the most powerful groups in a community frequently derive quite different hypotheses than does research using another set of information, for example, case studies of important political decisions made in the community.

Finally, even a researcher’s use of evidence will be influenced by his or her frame of reference. While scientists try to be objective, the literature is full of episodes in which a researcher refuses to abandon his or her theory

and continues to seek confirming evidence long after other scholars have given up. On the other hand, evidence that could contradict a researcher’s hypothesis may be overlooked or interpreted in a manner supportive of the claim. In a classic example of this phenomenon Stephen Jay Gould describes how an eminent scientist in the mid-1800s consistently mismeasured and miscalculated skull sizes in an effort (probably unconscious) to prove the superiority of the Caucasian race.⁷ In the 1980s injuries to early hominid skulls are cited by some as evidence of man’s violent nature and by others as evidence only of normal wear and tear.⁸

These categories can be applied to daily life, as well as to more academic disputes. When parents and children disagree, they are frequently talking about slightly different subjects, referring to different sets of information (e.g., authority versus peer opinion), and interpreting the facts differently. Several administrators have suggested using frame of reference models to help different groups gain some distance from keenly felt problems by putting themselves in the position of others involved.

A “Writing-Anthropology” Unit

When used in a course such as world history or anthropology, the frame of

reference model can help students begin to appreciate the complex process of answering a question such as, “But haven’t men always dominated women?” First, students are presented with contrasting reports of a society often used as an example by writers considering that question. In the case of male dominance, as well as many other possible “cultural universals,” social scientists frequently have turned to studies of the !Kung San (“Bushmen”) of Africa’s Kalahari Desert, described by Richard Leakey as “something of a model for what true hunting and gathering is all about.”⁹ Since for over 90 percent of human history our ancestors lived as foragers or hunter-gatherers, the !Kung, who until recently lived in that fashion, may offer clues to what has “always” been and what has not. However, once students see how difficult it is to arrive at a clear description of male-female relationships among the !Kung, they generally become more skeptical about universal generalizations and one-dimensional descriptions of other cultures.

1. Introduction. To illustrate the frame of reference concept to students and open discussion about the ways an author’s frame of reference can influence reports of another culture, students are given excerpts from two contrasting accounts about the relationships between !Kung men and



Using photographs or film, students can record their observations and make inferences about the people they are studying. They find that both observation and inference are more complicated processes than they had thought

women. The readings used in this lesson are from Lorna Marshall's *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae* and Patricia Draper's article, "Kung Women: Contrasts in Sexual Egalitarianism in Foraging and Sedentary Contexts" in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*.¹⁰ Both excerpts have been used successfully with high school classes in which students' reading abilities ranged from 8th grade to college levels.

To highlight the discrepancies and differences in tone between the two readings, it is better initially to divide the class and have each group read only one of the excerpts. They can switch assignments the next night. Students are directed to take notes on the main points each author makes about the following areas:

- the relative influence of !Kung men and women,
- the relative prestige of !Kung men and women, and
- the specific adjectives each author uses to describe !Kung women.

Each student also writes an essay summarizing how he or she thinks the author would answer the question, "Is there male dominance in the !Kung society?" Essentially, this is the student's attempt to identify the author's main hypothesis or organizing idea.

After the first assignment students who have read Marshall's excerpt are generally convinced that there is male dominance in !Kung society, while those who have read the Draper article are not so sure. When each half of the class has still read only one article, the authors' claims can be written on the board so the class can see the differences and look for ways to reconcile the two views or to account for the contradictions. Teachers can stimulate a livelier discussion by asking the class a general question such as "Do !Kung men or women have more influence?" rather than focusing on one author at a time. Figure 2 shows typical lists of ideas and information that students generate from reading the articles.

While comparing the three lists on the board, students find that some apparent contradictions can be reconciled. For example, !Kung women could be both "quiet" and "vivacious" depending on the occasion and whom they are with. On the other hand, some statements, such as those about returning gatherers, seem directly

contradictory and require more analysis. In addition, the tone of the readings and the sense one gets of the relationships between !Kung men and women are different and lead to different conceptions of the quality of their lives. Teachers can highlight these differences by asking students to imagine they are illustrating a children's book. How would a picture based on Marshall's information differ from one based on Draper's description?

At this point at least one student usually asks, "So, whom do we believe?" Some students express frustration and wonder whether all social studies is "just opinion." Here is where the frame of reference diagram shown in Figure 1 can be introduced. A teacher can specify that both authors probably present some of the truth and both have probably missed or misconstrued other things. In building their cases, each has emphasized dif-

ferent facts. After explaining the diagram, the teacher can ask students to suggest what each author's frame of reference might be and how it might influence the author's research and reporting.

2. Identifying frames of reference. To help students make inferences about an author's frame of reference, the teacher can give them or elicit from them a set of categories that could contribute to such a framework: age, time of fieldwork, specialty within a discipline, political or professional affiliations, theories the author has developed or been associated with, significant life events, personality, and so on. Students can also work back from an author's set of information and subjects of major interest to suggest what some components of the author's frame of reference might be.

At this point it is also important for the teacher to ask about other influ-

List 1: Ideas and Information from *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae* by Lorna Marshall

- In some ways women lean on the men, look to them for protection, and depend on them in !Kung society.
- !Kung women are less outgoing than the men.
- Some !Kung women say the men know more than they do.
- Returning hunters are greeted with excitement; returning gatherers are not. Gathering is drudgery.
- Adjectives the author uses to describe !Kung women: quiet, modest, gentle, compliant.
- Possible organizing idea or hypothesis: In !Kung society, men are the dominant sex.

List 2: Ideas and Information from "Kung Women: Contrasts in Sexual Egalitarianism in Foraging and Sedentary Contexts" in *Toward an Anthropology of Women* by Patricia Draper

- A relaxed and egalitarian relationship exists between !Kung men and women in their traditional society.
- Small groups of !Kung women forage 8-10 miles from home with no thought that they need protection.
- Gathering requires great skill and includes collecting information about game. Women derive self-esteem from their work.
- Returning gatherers are greeted excitedly by the children.
- Women retain control over the food they gather.
- Adjectives the author uses to describe !Kung women: vivacious, self-confident, independent, self-contained.
- Possible organizing idea or hypothesis: In !Kung society, women are not dominated by men.

List 3: Ideas and Information Both Authors Agree Upon

- Women gather most vegetable food.
- 60-80 percent of !Kung diet is vegetable food.
- Men hunt large game.
- Meat is considered the more desirable food by both men and women.
- There is no system of offices or rules giving !Kung men power over women.

Fig. 2. Data Students Generate from Reading the Two Excerpts



Students can also work with visuals to produce a pictorial essay illustrating a theme, for example, the importance of woman as the gatherer. Groups might also choose three pictures that would best illustrate 'Kung life for a textbook, supporting their choices with good reasons.

ences on a researcher's findings in addition to frame of reference. These influences include the length, location, and time of the study, limitations of methodology and the researcher's skills, and countless other variables that can cause two authors investigating the same topic to arrive at different conclusions. Information on the author's background and research methods is readily available, but some issues, such as personality, would require considerably more research.

After students have investigated a frame of reference for Draper and for Marshall and have considered the other influences mentioned above, they can suggest what areas each author might have overemphasized or overlooked and what alternative interpretations of observed behaviors or statements would be possible.

3. *Closure*: To close this exercise students can generate three lists in relation to the issue of male dominance among the 'Kung:

- Things we know about 'Kung men and women (tentative).
- Things about 'Kung men and women we would still need to find

out to answer our questions about dominance.

- Terms we need to define more clearly (e.g., dominance).

While it is necessary to provide some closure to the lessons on contrasting viewpoints, it is also important not to give students the idea that complex questions about a society or event can be "settled" in several days. By asking students to identify facts that are generally agreed upon, the teacher can counteract the uneasiness that some students will feel at not being given "right answers." The teacher can help students see the value of some science as a process of discovery, rather than simply a canon of universal laws buttressed by airtight studies. This is important because, while students do need to be skeptical about much "received wisdom," exposing them to conflicting accounts may only make them more cynical. The frame of reference approach should be used to stress the value and difficulty of arriving at a consensus about reality, rather than to unmask the biases of various authors. Students need to realize that the process of doing research involves reflective self-examination on every-

one's part, and that their own biases, not just those of published authors, need to be scrutinized.

The final step in the Writing-Anthropology unit is for each student to produce a history, an ethnography, or an essay. The length and complexity of the paper will depend on the depth of study and the abilities of the student. It may be only several paragraphs or as long as ten pages. The purpose of the assignment is to make students choose their own ways of linking the facts learned into a statement about sex roles. In the process of deciding which hypothesis they favor, which facts they will include, and how to interpret those facts, students begin to reflect on their own frames of reference. A particularly effective method is to ask students to write two short essays, one from a personal perspective and the second from an opposing or alien point of view, and then to reflect on two questions to conclude the exercise:

- Why did I emphasize certain facts and downplay other data in my first essay?
- Do I still think my initial interpretation was better? Why or why not?

By answering these questions students frequently gain new insights into their own assumptions, values, and attitudes. When applying the frame of reference model to various fields, teachers have developed several other effective variations of the method involving role-playing, more extensive research and written work, and artistic and musical interpretations, among others.

The Frame of Reference Model: Potentials and Problems

Teachers who have experimented with the frame of reference model have been enthusiastic about the kinds of discussions and related experiences that its use has stimulated. For some, focusing on the influences of different frames of reference seems to have led to a "conversion experience." One young teacher wrote, "The whole idea of frame of reference still both fascinates and angers me. It upsets me because as a social studies teacher I've very often accepted the 'text' or common view and never gone out of my

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way to present the other side. . . .” She reported that following her experience in the Approaches in Anthropology Institute her 7th graders had become “very aware of the idea of frame of reference.”

Teachers have reported that the model is effective in helping students understand contrasting perspectives and motivating them to continue to seek such perspectives. After having introduced a frame of reference approach just once, several teachers found that their students independently looked for contrasting perspectives about subsequent topics. Teachers’ reports and our analyses of their students’ work indicate that students from a wide range of backgrounds and basic skills levels can understand the concepts in the model and are able to apply them to a variety of issues.

School-Linked Constraints

Some of the problems teachers may face when using the frame of reference model arise from the nature of schooling in the United States. Many teachers feel constrained by the practice of systemwide testing that evaluates the quantity of material covered rather than the quality of thinking about the topics. Even in schools without systemwide tests, most teachers

feel so pressured to cover material that time to focus on thinking about the content is at a premium.

Another factor limiting use of the model, report teachers, is the lack of materials appropriate for their students. Many articles reflecting other than mainstream frames of reference are aimed at college or professional audiences. Teachers also need more opportunities to learn about new ideas and materials reflecting contrasting frameworks in their fields. School systems need to provide teachers with more time and support for their own professional development.

Finally, teachers need time for curriculum work and for responding to students’ written thoughts. Frequently the efforts of teachers have gone far beyond the call of duty as defined by any teaching contract. Many teachers have been innovative in developing new activities and techniques to illustrate frame of reference and related concepts. They have either found appropriate primary sources or edited materials to suit their students’ needs. Some have assigned much more written work than they did previously. One teacher decided to use only essay exams. If more teachers are going to enter into extensive “written dialogues” with students via essays and critical comments, while gathering and adapting more source material, additional time for these activities will have to be made available.

Many teachers are interested in designing lessons and units to help students think more critically and reflectively about the effects of bias. However, they find themselves fighting against certain structural limitations. If our schools are going to encourage the meaningful examination of contrasting views of reality, those limits will have to be changed. In particular, teachers need more opportunity and encouragement to encounter, reflect on, and develop lessons that highlight the wide range of perspectives that shape the bodies of knowledge they teach. □

1. Ernest L. Boyer, *High School* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983). Mary Anne Wolf, *Approaches in Anthropology: A Study of Thinking and Teaching about Contrasting Frameworks* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1983).

2. See John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), especially Chapter Four; Boyer, *High School*; and Karen B. Wiley, “The Status of Pre-College Science, Mathematics, and Social Science Education: 1955, 1975,” *Social Science Education*, Volume III (Social Science Education Consortium, Inc., 1977), available from Government Printing Office, #038-000-00363-1. James P. Shaver has written the shorter and valuable “An Interpretive Report on the Status of Pre-College Social Studies Education Based on Three NSF-Funded Studies,” also available from the Government Printing Office, #78-SP-1132.

3. Robert H. Ennis, “A Conception of Rational Thinking” in *Philosophy of Education*, 1979, ed. J. R. Coombs (Normal, Ill.: The Philosophy of Education Society, 1980). S. P. Norris, “Defining Observational Competence,” *Science Education* 68 (1984): 129-142. Kevin O’Reilly, “A Guide to Critical Thinking,” Critical Thinking in History Project, Hamilton-Wenham High School, South Hamilton, Massachusetts, 1982.

4. Henry Giroux, “Teaching Content and Thinking through Writing,” *Social Education* (March 1979). For a fuller discussion of the institute program and its results see Wolf, *Approaches in Anthropology*. For more theoretical background about frameworks in anthropology, see Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1968); and Dell Hymes, ed., *Reinventing Anthropology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969).

5. The model is discussed in greater depth in Henry Giroux, “Writing and Critical Thinking in the Social Studies,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 8 (1978): 291-310.

6. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

7. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1981), 50-69.

8. Richard E. Leakey and Roger Lewin, *People of the Lake* (New York: Avon Books, 1978).

9. Ibid.

10. Lorna Marshall, *The Kung of Nyae Nyae* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), 175-178. Patricia Draper, “Kung Women: Contrasts in Foraging and Sedentary Contexts,” in Rayna Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975).

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