



# A Critical Approach to History Textbook Images

Pranitha Bharath

University of KwazuluNatal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Pranitha Bharath

I am a Social Studies educator employed by the Department of Basic Education. I work at an inland primary school in the capital city of Pietermaritzburg which lies in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. I lecture the PGCE History and the Honours module in Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I supervised teacher trainees as an online Practice Teaching tutor. My ultimate goal is to teach research and practical skills to my diverse student body and to be part of the textbook approval agency in South Africa. I am passionate about high quality Learning and Teaching Support Materials. I believe quality resources can support critical thinking. My interest in school history textbooks led to my conference presentation at the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research in Germany. I love travelling and my visit to the historical sites in capital city of Berlin was exceptional. My professional endeavours would not be possible without the support of my son and extended family. My son is a third-year law student. He teaches me about legal matters, fast cars, online gaming and movies, all of which inject balance and enjoyment in my life. I am available on Research Gate, LinkedIn, and Instagram.



Published August 2022

DOI [10.29173/assert43](https://doi.org/10.29173/assert43)

Pages: 48-56

**Funding:** The Dr Killie Campbell Bursary from SANS (South African National Society)

Distributed under  
[Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC 4.0\)](#).

**Copyright:** Ownership of this article's copyright remains with the author(s), subject to the [Creative Commons license](#).

**Keywords** image analysis, history textbooks, evidence, sources, narratives

## INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, textbooks are reinforced as critical learning and teaching resources by the Department of Basic Education's (2021) Revised Annual Teaching Plans for Social Sciences (p. 1). Those selected for use in a classroom must be CAPS<sup>1</sup> compliant and listed on the

<sup>1</sup> Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) is the official National Curriculum Statement published in 2011 in South Africa by the Department of Basic Education for all subjects for Grades R – 12.

## OPEN ACCESS



**ASSERT**

Research for Teachers in a Hurry

Learning and Teaching Support Material (Kwazulu-Natal Department of Education, 2014), a department textbook catalogue. The pedagogical approach is to teach history by the rigorous process of historical inquiry involving the specific aims and skills, bringing together text, visuals and any other material that can tell the past (Department of Basic Education, 2011, p. 8). Bertram (2012) argues that in the field of History Education, two strands of knowledge, specialized substantive knowledge and specialized procedures are integral for developing historical thinking. Substantive history knowledge includes knowledge of key concepts and periods that make up the content of history. In contrast, procedural knowledge is the organizing ideas that structure events in history (Ashby & Lee, 2000). These second-order concepts include establishing historical significance, using primary source evidence, identifying continuity and change, analyzing cause and consequence, taking historical perspectives and understanding the moral dimension of historical interpretation (Seixas, 2006).

Bertram (2012) argued that these two strands of knowledge can come apart when the practice is recontextualized to the school classroom. Textbooks are one way in which this can happen as the writers vary the degree of specialization of both types of knowledge. Figure 1 shows the Esoteric, Public, Descriptive and Expressive Domains and the specific criteria (content, language and procedures) for each.

<b>Substantive knowledge</b>	<b>Procedural knowledge</b>	
	<b>Specialised (+)</b>	<b>Generic (-)</b>
<b>Specialised (+)</b>	<b>Esoteric</b> (content clearly historical; language specialised, and specialised procedural knowledge that fosters historical thinking)	<b>Expressive</b> (content clearly historical; language specialised but generic procedural knowledge)
<b>Generic (-)</b>	<b>Descriptive</b> (content knowledge not specialised to history, perhaps located in the everyday; language unspecialised; specialised procedural knowledge that fosters historical thinking)	<b>Public</b> (content knowledge not specialised to history, perhaps located in the everyday; language unspecialised; generic procedural knowledge)

Figure 1 Tool for the Institutionalization of images (Bertram, 2012, p. 16)

## RESEARCH

I used Bertram's (2012) process of 'institutionalization' to locate into domains the images and supporting information from seven history textbooks, one per grade, one chapter per book, spanning three phases of the Foundation, Intermediate and Secondary phases in the South African history curriculum. These books were purposively sampled as they are the popular choice at the school I teach and several others in the district. Photographs, pictures, drawings or portraits, captions and supporting information as well as what learners were required to do with the images, were coded as substantive or procedural knowledge. For



**ASSERT**

Research for Teachers in a Hurry

example, if an image was historical in content, was supported by historical language, and was accompanied by historical procedures as it required specialized ways of working with it—was coded within the Esoteric Domain.

## FINDINGS

Table 1, below, shows the number of images across the seven textbooks and where they placed in each domain.

	Foundation Phase	Intermediate Phase				Senior Phase		
	Gr. 3	Gr. 4	Gr. 5	Gr. 6	Gr. 7	Gr. 8	Gr. 9	
<b>Esoteric Domain</b>	18 (60%)	5 (20%)	19 (73%)	8 (38%)	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	1 (5%)	
<b>Expressive Domain</b>	3 (10%)	2 (8%)	3 (11,5%)	7 (33%)	17 (80%)	15 (80%)	12 (60%)	
<b>Descriptive Domain</b>	0 (0%)	5 (20%)	1 (4%)	1 (5%)	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	
<b>Public Domain</b>	9 (30%)	13 (52%)	3 (11,5%)	5 (24%)	2 (10%)	3 (17%)	6 (30%)	
<b>Total Number of Pictures/ Photographs</b>	30 (100%)	25 (100%)	26 (100%)	21 (100%)	21 (100%)	18 (100%)	19 (100%)	

Ideally, images should be located in the Esoteric Domain, where conditions for the content, language and procedures related to the image are specialized to history. However, in this study there are a greater concentration of images in the Expressive Domain, particularly in the higher grades suggesting that learners engage in more generic ways rather than using specialized historical procedures. The generic use of images can be attributed to the general lack of provenance with the images. [Havekes et al. \(2009, January 14-16\)](#) identifies provenance as the details of the date and author of the source and the process of corroboration.

Some images in the textbooks are labeled as sources while others are not. There is no distinction between a generic drawing of an idea of the past and a primary or secondary source. If such a textbook is used alone, the images will contribute little to support historical understanding. I found images without sufficient supporting information or captioning.

There were no photographs at certain points in history, so drawings qualify as secondary sources of information and not evidence. Pictures drawn by textbook artists to create something out of the past are generic sources of information. For example, the colonization of the Cape in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a time that could only be captured from old books (such as drawings, paintings) and, documents (such as journals, letters, diaries), and oral sources (people who lived at the time and who spoke to others who recorded their experiences). There are not many primary sources that are still available for historical reconstruction. It is not acceptable to argue that the past did not exist because there are no primary sources



**ASSERT**

Research for Teachers in a Hurry

of certain events. For this reason, a drawing is presented of the early Cape Town harbor (Grade 7 in the Senior Phase) so learners can use their present knowledge of the developed harbor to “imagine” and understand how it transitioned, scaffolding ideas of change and continuity and cause and effect. Teachers will have to justify the drawing if it is critiqued as unreliable by learners.

While generic procedural knowledge is foregrounded in the higher grades, the lower grades of 3 and 5 (Foundation and Intermediate Phases) have higher placements in the Esoteric Domain, indicating greater engagement with images using specialized or historical procedures. This can be attributed to the type of history taught in the formative years, which is far more localized and simplified.

Higher grades in the Senior Phase have more complex concepts and more significant events over larger spaces in the world which is a challenge to capture in image formats. History in the higher grades deals with areas and countries far removed from the learner’s locality, showing a decontextualization of knowledge. This is difficult to capture in text and complex to teach. The Grade 8 (Senior Phase) textbook presents a greater number of images that are historical in content. They are black and white and show real people, buildings, and surroundings allowing learners to access past reality. More recent photographs show more modern, effective ways to capture and present events. But these images lack proper provenance. Learners require as evidence the time period of construction, captions about the year, by whom it was taken, and for what purpose. This information helps construct historical accounts.

## PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

I would recommend that teachers of history understand knowledge classification within “The Domains of Practice for School History” (Bertram, 2012) and consciously create opportunities for learners to approach images with a critical lens to master history content and specialized historical procedures. If images and information are in the public domain, teachers can adjust methodologies to create links to the Esoteric Domain. Not all images can be exclusively located in the ‘Esoteric Domain’ and not all primary sources are properly contextualized so teachers can acquire alternative sources properly contextualized to help learners construct narratives.

The teacher can decide if it is more appropriate to focus on substantive knowledge than procedural knowledge. Learners cannot be engaged in the critical process of source analysis when there are incomplete sources and those without a context, learners. Judgments cannot be reasoned.

If images or pictures are more than aesthetic ‘ornaments’ worn by pages, then they should be ‘mined’ at deeper levels for integral historical evidence. The ‘mining’ involves this critical approach towards imagery or any source material in the text. The teacher has to explain the context of the image and scaffold the background if images are not appropriately captioned. Teachers may not have to do this for every image, but they need to step in if learners believe what they see constitutes evidence. If a textbook is used solely by the learner, then there is



**ASSERT**

Research for Teachers in a Hurry

little that a teacher can do apart from teaching learners how to develop a critical approach to images.

## Q & A WITH PRANITHA BHARATH

### Question # 1:

#### *Teacher's Question:*

Are there specific aspects of this work that teachers most struggle to figure out on their own, and what suggestions you might have for their own learning?

#### *Pranitha Bharath's Response:*

I find that teachers know 'what' to teach as the curriculum designates the topics and but the 'how' is unclear. A history teacher's formal training should include the theory and framework around image and documentary analysis. This training involves distinguishing between substantive and procedural knowledge and how they relate to each other. I suggest that teachers first understand the specific criteria in each of Bertram's (2012) domains so as to locate information from the textbook into particular domains. The image, for example, is located in a domain depending on its subject-specific or historical content, its supporting language and learner engagement with the image. It can then be classified as either generic or specialize to history. Teachers can manipulate and re-interpret this material for the learner if they understand the nature of the information. They can choose to teach it differently so what is 'in' text (level of theory) differs from what is actually taught (level of practice). Teachers can cover a gap by supplementary materials and explanation. I provide an example below to show how a teacher can classify an image and then teach over it so as to cover a void. This method of image interrogation alerts the teacher to potential challenges with images in history. Teachers can locate and integrate sources across other modalities so learners can compare and corroborate information. Doing so enables the development of multiple perspectives, an important aspect of procedural knowledge in history.

### Question # 2:

#### *Teacher's Question:*

How can an image be validated?

#### *Pranitha Bharath's Response:*

Textbooks are often seen as some kind of authority in the classroom presenting 'legitimate knowledge'. In South Africa they are labeled as 'curriculum-compliant'. We can find room to question the validity of all its contents. Publishers have already printed images in textbooks for teachers and learners to use but it does not mean that all content within the texts are excellent sources of inquiry. Bertram's (2012) domains show that information can be classified differently and the specific criteria may not be intended for textbook authors. They



**ASSERT**

Research for Teachers in a Hurry

can however, be helpful to teachers if they consider the steps below:

1. 1. Using Bertram' (2012) tool, an historical image ought to be in the Esoteric Domain, where both the substantive and procedural knowledge specialized. For that, specific conditions—the image's content is historical, accompanied specialized historical language (supporting information) specialized procedural knowledge (primary and other source integration and corroboration)—are used to build up evidence-based narratives.
2. Authenticating images as primary and reliable sources involves provenance. This process involves a timeline of information from origin to present—information about who created the image, why they created the image, the purpose and reasons, as well as the date and time of construction. The supporting information (captioning, paragraph statements, tasks for learners) creates a context without which an image is worth very little.

### **Question # 3:**

#### ***Teacher's Question:***

It is a lot of work to validate each of the images in a text when the publisher is not providing that for a teacher. What advice would you provide to teachers that can help streamline the process?

#### ***Pranitha Bharath's Response:***

Teachers, like publishers, do not have the time to validate all the images. However, where there is potential for confusion, especially for a learner in the primary phase, a teacher can seek alternate images to back up the trail of evidence. Space constraints in a textbook may not allow access to the greater variety of images that can support a topic. Teachers can use alternate modalities to advance an understanding by accessing multiple other versions of the same topic by consulting with other books, the archives and online platforms. The teacher's own knowledge is also a great backup to provide scaffolding on ideas scattered in textbooks. Many learners need this additional support and explanation to break down images for understanding.

All of the domains on the tool are useful to teachers because information, like images in textbooks, can shift on a continuum from generic to specialized forms. Recognizing where knowledge fits is a good starting point to improve teacher practice.

### **Question # 4:**

#### ***Teacher's Question:***

How might the history teacher use the domain concepts like Esoteric and Expressive Domains to increase learner engagement with visual images.



**ASSERT**

Research for Teachers in a Hurry

### Pranitha Bharath's Response:

The best way to demonstrate the utility of Bertram's tool is to show an image in the Expressive Domain and how a teacher can consciously move it over to the Esoteric Domain. The history teacher would analyse Figure 2 and its supporting information using the specific criteria of the tool and locate the image in one of the four domains.

up the children of the house.

- Slave children did some work on the farms such as tying bundles of a crop. They also helped look after younger white children.

**Classroom activity 6.5**

Work with a partner.

Look at the picture of the slave working in the field in **Source B**. Tell your partner what you notice about the picture.

**Source B** *under these trees.*

S2

T17

*This picture shows a slave working in the field. He is watched by a farmer or a company official.*

• Topic 6 Colonisation of the Cape 17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries 129

**Figure 2** An image that lies in the Expressive Domain, Retrieved from Social Sciences. Solutions for all. Grade 7. Learner's Book, p. 129. Image obtained from the Western Cape Archives and Records Service (n.d.; L1379)

The image is located in the Expressive Domain because it has historical content—the theme of slavery. The substantive knowledge content is seen in its caption. The 'slave-master' concept emanating from the picture's caption points to its substantive historical content. At the same time, the procedures learners engage with are generic. In the supporting activity, the learner is asked to tell their partner what they notice about the image. This is general extraction of data from observation. The drawing is labelled as a 'source' but is a source of information. If teachers locate the image in the Expressive Domain, they must adjust teaching to lead learners to conclude that this is not a primary source. This is not evidence. The teacher can task the learners with an activity that develops skills specialised to history. The learner activity should be about the imbalance of power between the two people in the picture, calling for critique and understanding of the historical context. This entails important substantive and procedural knowledge, which would propel the learning into the Esoteric Domain. Learners would acquire a narrative about slavery instead of responding to general observations of people in the picture. Teachers would identify this image as an instructional image with a rich source of information but it is not historical evidence. The drawing captures an event in time and space with an intent for visual learning. Learners construct deeper historical understandings if they wrestle with the nature of evidence, which is absent in this case.



**ASSERT**

Research for Teachers in a Hurry

## Question # 5:

### **Teacher's Question:**

What additional resources might you recommend for teachers who want to integrate this process more fulsomely.

### **Pranitha Bharath's Response:**

I consulted all of the sources listed below for my Ph.D., and they are all excellent in providing teachers with greater detail on the critical approach to textbook images.

**Barat Educational Foundation's (2012) Analysing Primary Sources: Learning from Images.** This source provides nuanced tools for helping students analyse images. It goes into great depth to set up the Image Analysis Guiding Tool or criteria for analysis. The tool involves clear stages of Observing (Learners identify and note details), Reflecting (learners generate and test hypothesis), and Questioning (the questions that learners can raise from the image).

**Howell & Prevenier's (2001). From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods.** As the title suggests, this source is valuable in introducing teachers to the historian's craft. They address the methods or procedures historians use to understand substantive knowledge. They focus on reliability issues and testing and analyzing various sources to obtain knowledge of the past. Rather than one truth, they advance the idea of multiple perspectives.

**Peck & Seixas (2008). Benchmarks of Historical Thinking: First Steps.** This journal article presents the academic and theory in History Education by describing in detail the substantive and procedural knowledge types. The writers elaborate on how the traditional shape of history as a body of facts and the dissemination of facts by the teacher transitioned to the "new" inquiry-based history. If teachers are going to understand and use Bertram's (2012) tool, then this article is the theoretical lens.

## REFERENCES

- Department of Basic Education. (2021). Revised Annual Teaching Plans for Social Sciences, Term One. <http://www.education.gov.za>
- Ashby, P., & Lee, P. (2000). Progression in historical understanding among students ages 7-14. In P. N. Stearns, P. Seixas, & S. Wineburg (Eds.), *Knowing, teaching and learning history* (pp. 199–222). New York University Press.
- Barat Educational Network. (2012). *Analysing Primary Sources: Learning from Images*. <https://primarysourcenus.org/2012/04/analyzing-primary-sources-learning-from-images/>
- Bertram, C. (2012). Exploring an "Historical Gaze": a language of description for the practice of school history. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 44(3), 429–442.
- Department of Basic Education. (2011). *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement Grade 4-6. Social Sciences*. Department of Basic Education. <http://www.education.gov.za>



**ASSERT**

Research for Teachers in a Hurry

- Havekes, H., Coppen, P. A., Boxtel, C., & Imants, J. (2009, January 14-16). *Active historical thinking in Dutch history textbooks*. Branschweig, Germany.
- Howell, M., & Prevenier, W. (2001). *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (and others, Ed.). Cornell University Press.
- Kwazulu-Natal Department of Education. (2014). *Learning and Teaching Support Material: Textbooks catalogue for 2009 Academic Year*. General education and Training (GET): Grades 4-7. Department of Basic Education.
- Peck, C., & Seixas, P. (2008). Benchmarks of Historical Thinking: First Steps. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 31(4), 1015–1038.
- Seixas, P. (2006). Benchmarks of historical thinking: A framework for assessment in Canada. The Center for the study of Historical Consciousness. *Recuperado el*, 16, 1–12.
- Western Cape Archives and Records Service. (n.d.). *An image that lies in the Expressive Domain*. The Leica Collection. L1379.