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The New Inquiry-based Approach: What It Means for the Teaching and Learning of History in Singapore Schools

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Introduction

Secondary Humanities teachers in Singapore are well-acquainted with recent developments and changes that accompanied the launch of the new history syllabus in October 2012. A most notable development was the adoption of inquiry-based learning as the recommended pedagogy for instruction. What was the logic for this change? Why was there a need to pursue inquiry-based learning for school history? What was the spirit behind the change? What did the curriculum developers hope to achieve by pushing for an inquiry approach to history learning? Some of these answers can be obtained from the Singapore Ministry of Education syllabus documents, the Teaching and Learning Guides (TLGs), and other related documents. In this commentary, I offer some of my personal thoughts on the matter and I focus on some issues that require addressing if we are serious about proposing an instructional approach that aims to develop students' disciplinary thinking in history.

Why the Changes?

In short, I would say that there was a recognition that things were *not* actually going as well as they should. Yes, our students did very well in the national examinations and have consistently posted impressive scores. But the perception that has emerged over the years was that although many of these students

appeared to know a lot about the things they studied, there remained a high level of scepticism as to whether they understood much of what they had studied. From informal conversations with colleagues and school practitioners, the reasons offered for students not understanding much about the history they learnt in their classrooms ranged from too much direct or didactic instruction, too much algorithmic or mechanical learning, too much drilling or rote learning, too much teaching to the test, and so on. Subsequently, a common idea that emerged was that while our students have proven very adept at absorbing transmitted knowledge or information, they were not able to construct new knowledge—one of the characteristics of critical and independent learners.

In order to raise standards of history, geography and social studies education in Singapore, policy-makers and curriculum planners in the Curriculum and Planning Development Division (CPDD) recognized the need for a major shake-up in the way the Humanities subjects have been taught in schools. Inquiry-based learning was seen as the key to transforming the teaching of the Humanities from a largely content-transmission approach to an approach that gets students to take ownership of their learning by purposefully seeking information and constructing their own knowledge within the norms and standards set by the disciplinary nature of the subject. In history, the major

thrust of inquiry-based learning was targeted at getting students to “appreciate the underpinnings of the discipline” as they engage in the process of “doing history” (Ministry of Education/Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2012, p. 12). Inquiry was deemed essential for providing students with the opportunity to build essential understandings, particularly about the concepts that lie at the heart of history.

The overarching intention for the shift appeared to be a conscious desire to align this new approach to the Teach Less, Learn More (TLLM) initiative, as well as the attributes set out in the list of 21st Century Competencies, and more specifically, the section focused on “Critical and Inventive Thinking.” As the syllabus documents indicate, there is now an overt drive to deepen students' understandings of historical concepts (such as change, cause, significance and evidence) through inquiry-based learning. By getting students to better understand the concepts that underpin the structure of the historical discipline, students' critical faculties may be enhanced, their perspectives broadened, and as a result, they may be able to subsequently make better sense of historical events and the world around them.

Not only was the pedagogy seen as appropriate in facilitating the growth and development of students' understandings and intellectual curiosities, it also fit in well with TLLM's drive towards a more student-centred approach to learning. The content reduction and proposals for in-depth inquiry for certain topics in the history syllabus, for example, may be a way for policy makers and curriculum planners to highlight to teachers their intention of getting students to acquire greater ownership over their own learning. Students were to be given more opportunities to explore significant questions and issues in history, to examine historical evidence in depth, to construct explanations for historical events, as well as to establish well-substantiated arguments and form defensible

historical conclusions within an inquiry-based framework.

Additionally, the current move towards an inquiry-based approach in the teaching of the Humanities appeared to be underpinned by an awareness of the cognitive *value* or intellectual *worth* of the subjects in raising levels of student thinking and understanding. The move towards a discipline-oriented focus (or what CPDD colleagues described as a move towards “disciplinarity”) also suggested an intention – on the part of the curriculum developers – to get students to come to grips with the *nature* of the subject they are studying. Such an aspiration may be characterized, in part, by the focus placed on *historical understanding* at the centre of school history and an attempt to re-forge a subject that appeared to have been increasingly hijacked by assessment-oriented teaching.

Is Inquiry as a Pedagogical Approach Sufficient to Develop More Advanced Understandings?

As a history educator, it was easy for me to agree with the intention and the objectives put forward in the syllabus documents. As a history education researcher, however, I can't help but feel that there is something missing. We can agree that, first, there was a need for some changes in the way we have approached the teaching of history in Singapore. History learning must move beyond simply accumulating historical knowledge and include developing students' understanding as to how that knowledge was constructed (Lee, 1991), and how historical arguments are developed (Wineburg, 1991). Second, we also know that these changes were meant to reduce the reliance on direct teacher instruction (*Teach Less*) and get students to take ownership over their own learning (*Learn More*) through an inquiry-based learning framework designed to develop deeper understandings. Nevertheless, important questions remain: How can I really know that the inquiry-based approach will lead

to my students developing higher-level understandings about the subject? And how can I know – for sure – that my students’ disciplinary understandings have developed in a way that they should?

On its own, the use of inquiry as a pedagogical approach may not be adequate in helping students develop deeper conceptual understandings in history. In my view, an essential aspect that needs to be further developed is the teacher’s awareness of, and knowledge about, student cognition, for example, knowing how students think, what prior ideas they have, how they make sense of new knowledge, and what teachers need to do to move students’ ideas forward. Specifically, this would mean that history teachers need to fully understand students’ prior ideas and have a strong grasp of the conceptual nature of the discipline. For example, it would be difficult for teachers to know if their teaching is making any difference to students’ thinking or understanding if they themselves are not aware of how students’ ideas can be developed, or how students’ misconceptions about history can be effectively addressed. In the same way, without a competent grasp of the nature of historical knowledge or the disciplinary ideas that shape historical questions and organize historical arguments (Counsell, 1997), teachers may not be able to think of more helpful means to develop their students’ ideas about history in the proper direction.

Furthermore, inquiry-based lessons can be challenging and time-consuming to plan and implement. Such lessons can be exceptionally hard for teachers who lack disciplinary expertise and knowledge about the ways to develop students’ ideas. By its very nature, inquiry requires that teachers be adventurous in their teaching approaches as they devise ways to present students with opportunities for cognitive challenges where students are taught “to get into a muddle” and “to find their way out of it” (R. Ashby, personal communication, 11/03/2010). Nevertheless, if such a time-

consuming strategy is not seen to be improving students’ understandings of history in any distinct or recognizable ways, or if teachers are not able to see intellectual gains in a discernible way, they might end up setting tasks that would enable students to achieve pre-determined levels and not ones that can stretch their thinking in history. As a result of teachers’ lack of familiarity with the means to develop students’ ideas, the use of an inquiry approach may not be useful since teachers do not have any strategies in place to take advantage of the inquiry framework and move students’ conceptual understandings forward. In the end, even if history teachers used an inquiry-based learning strategy in the classroom, the “net gain” would remain quite questionable since they could not really be sure if their students’ understanding about a particular disciplinary concept, say causation or evidence in history, have progressed in the way that they think it should.

A Move toward a More Responsive Pedagogy in History Teaching

My proposal then is for history teachers to consider approaching inquiry-based lessons with their students’ ideas in mind. In short, I propose that teachers should approach the teaching of school history in a *responsive* way. For example, by familiarizing themselves with the kinds of prior ideas their students bring into the classroom, and to recognize the range of preconceptions (or misconceptions) students hold about certain concepts that are central to an understanding of the historical discipline.

Research evidence, especially from the work of *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999), show that an important starting point for teachers is the recognition that their students bring into the classroom pre-existing ideas or preconceptions about how the world works. Teachers should engage these initial understandings, both as a means to help students make sense of new knowledge,

as well as to develop more advanced conceptual understandings about the subject/discipline. If history teaching is about developing historical thinking and understanding, then, what may be necessary, in a sense, are shifts (Afandi & Baildon, 2010) in terms of our orientations towards teaching and learning, or what was referred to as “mental models” by CPDD’s Deputy Director, Ms Elaine Lim, at the recent syllabus launch in October 2013. Such re-orientations may involve shifts in the way we view the subject-matter we teach and what we perceive as the nature of disciplinary knowledge; in the way we have conventionally approached our teaching in the classroom and how we view students and their capacity to learn; in the way we regard our students and the pre-existing ideas they hold about the subject/discipline (as useful/helpful for instruction), and so on.

Two implications for professional practice of this proposal can be summarized as follows:

1. **Teachers need to be attentive to and more aware of the moves students make as they try to make sense of new knowledge.** Rather than chiefly emphasizing content, teachers should focus their instruction on being “able to view the subject matter through the eyes of the learner, as well as interpret learner’s comments, questions, and activities through the lenses of the subject” (McDiarmid, Ball & Anderson, 1989, p.194). If teachers are too preoccupied with content matters, they will not be able to listen to their students and identify possible misconceptions students may hold. Consequently, they may not be able to put in place corrective strategies to address and develop students’ *understandings*.
2. **Focus must shift in emphasis from teaching methods to being familiar with students’ ideas and having approaches for working with students’ ideas.** More engagement should be focused on teaching

goals as well as the ways to address and manage students’ disciplinary misconceptions than on teaching methods. Teaching methods are useful devices to transmit knowledge and vary students’ learning experience, but if teachers lack any conception of what their teaching aims might include, what objectives they are after, and what students bring into the classroom – methods are unlikely to deepen students’ understandings (Lee, 2011).

Approaching the teaching of school history in a responsive way requires Singapore teachers to think about instruction with students’ preconceptions in mind, for example engaging the students’ initial understandings to help them make sense of new knowledge and develop their appreciation of history and the past. As teachers become more sensitive or responsive to students’ learning, they will become more aware of the ideas students bring into the classroom, the misconceptions students have about history and historical knowledge, and the kind of resources that may be used to build students’ understandings.

Getting Students to Come to Grips with the Historical Discipline

In thinking about ways to move students’ ideas forward, however, knowing *where* to move students’ ideas towards is as important as recognizing students’ different starting points in terms of their understandings. For example, students who view history as fixed and real are likely to regard historical accounts as accurate copies of the past to be committed to memory. Others who view all historical accounts as inherently biased or as distorted interpretations by their authors would likely be distrustful of historical knowledge and the work of historians. In both instances, students’ misconceptions about history and the nature of historical accounts are likely to deepen and become entrenched if not addressed. Addressing students’ misconceptions involves teachers devising the means to move students’

ideas forward. One way to do this is to help students acquire *disciplinary* ways of looking at history and the nature of historical accounts. Students should view knowledge about history in evaluative terms – using criteria, standards or assessment by a community of scholars and not simply in substantive or subject-matter terms (Seixas, 1993). This is not to say, however, that students should be expected to use these standards as historians have used them. Historical understanding is not all or nothing (Lee, 2005); in the same way, these standards are not all or nothing attainments.

Teachers need to equip students with the intellectual tools to deal with the nature of historical knowledge help them develop the disposition to approach history in disciplinary ways, and provide them with a knowledge of what it means to converse in the grammar of history. We are not trying to induct students in the apprenticeship of professional history. School history, by its very nature, is limited in terms of what it can achieve. As other history educators have emphasized, an education in history is not so much for the purpose of creating “miniature professional historians” (Lee & Ashby, 2000, p. 204) or getting students to engage in a “mimicry of academic discourse” (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 5). Rather, the objective is to acquaint students with an understanding of a discipline rooted in the practice of historians and to understand what is involved when historians talk about the past. For a start, students would need to know that “the past” is not the same thing as “history”: the past is everything that ever happened in the world; history is what is claimed about that past (Lee, 2005). From there, students should be taught to understand that reconstructions of past events rest on the interpretation of the evidence and that historians use sources (or traces the past left behind) as evidence to build their arguments. Rather than reciting some taught algorithms for dealing with evidence in history, students should instead be made to *think* about evidence in *historical* terms. When used with

students’ cognition in mind, historical inquiries in the classroom can provide ample opportunities for students to approach historical sources in a more tentative but critical way – an approach that engages students’ understanding of evidence in history but does not impose a mechanical template of source analysis that has the effect of caging or confining students’ intellectual responses.

Conclusion

Teaching has been described by some as “a complex intellectual endeavour that demands disciplinary expertise, a deep understanding of students, and sophisticated pedagogical skills” (Hatch, 2006, p. 11). Beyond standard pedagogy, teachers need to be more responsive in their engagement with students’ preconceptions and devise ways to develop, shape and sharpen students’ understandings in those subjects. A responsive pedagogy in history education highlights the importance of teachers listening to students’ ideas and developing an awareness of the range of ideas and important concepts students are likely to work with in history. Clearly, the desire to change the way our students learn history (or any other humanities subjects) should not simply stop at the introduction of new pedagogies but should also include considerations as to what research has found about successful teaching, that is, that teachers must take into account students’ preconceptions that they bring to the classroom.

As history teachers, it is also important that we recognize our purpose for teaching the subject to children. This is because our purpose will shape our beliefs about history education, and influence the way we approach the subject. For example, we need to consider how we teach historical content, the decisions we make about curriculum matters such as methods and resources, and the important aspects of the discipline we want students to know and understand. At the same time, such

awareness of purpose must be coupled with our own beliefs about the value of history education for schoolchildren. If we are convinced that an education in history can help transform the ways students look at history, the past and the world around them, our approach to historical instruction must be one that supports the growth of adolescents' historical reasoning and thinking in history. Providing opportunities for students to manage historical questions, to work intensively with historical sources, and to subject historical knowledge to debate and conjecture can, in positive ways, affect the quality of students' historical learning. History teachers in Singapore, thus, are faced with three challenges: (1) how to improve teaching with inquiry in mind; (2) how to facilitate discovery learning in the classroom; and (3) how to manage the development of historical understandings amidst assessment imperatives. If inquiry-based learning is indeed about developing students' ability to construct knowledge and to think in disciplinary terms, teachers would then need to have sufficient opportunities to reflect upon their practice, think about ways to approach history lessons by actively engaging with students' preconceptions, and be given adequate support to develop their own expertise and familiarity with both inquiry and the conceptual aspects of the discipline.

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