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Towards an Effective Professional Development Model to Deepen History Teachers’ Understanding of Historical Concepts

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Abstract

This small-scale study explores professional development (PD) designs for history teachers in Singapore and proposes a PD model that uses a job-embedded collaborative approach. Drawing from research on effective PD and data gathered from questionnaires and interviews conducted with participants involved in a PD workshop, this paper considers the value of collaborative PD approaches aimed at promoting and encouraging historical thinking. The authors conclude that PD history workshops that are carefully designed to support the development of teachers’ professional knowledge bases, and ones that offer opportunities for teachers to actively translate conceptual ideas into concrete teaching strategies, are critical in transforming beliefs and practices that can work towards more robust historical thinking and discourse in the classroom.

Introduction

The teaching and learning of History as a disciplinary field of study in schools is a complex and sophisticated endeavor. The assumption that acquiring historical knowledge may be achieved simply by committing historical narratives (including factual details such as events, names and dates) to memory no longer holds. Preparing students for education in the 21st century involves expanding their knowledge base beyond content mastery or information accumulation, to include deeper understanding about the nature of a specific discipline and the development of relevant thinking and reasoning skills that can allow students to engage with the subject matter. Over the past few decades, research on history education has shown that learning history, for the purpose of deeper understanding, involves not only the study of historical narratives but also the acquisition of discipline-specific cognitive strategies that students can use to better learn and understand the past. To be able to better understand the nature of history, students must be equipped not only with the relevant historical content but also with the necessary tools that can enable them to think historically about the past.

Yet, many history education researchers (especially in the US and the UK) have found that historical thinking is counter-intuitive (Lee, 1999; Wineburg, 2001). Thinking historically about the past is not something that can be achieved naturally, and does not arise out of ordinary or everyday thinking. Having a
firm grasp of history entails understanding historical concepts, as well as the disposition to think about the past in ways that can move students beyond everyday conceptions and explanations. Some everyday ideas are completely incompatible with history; many students, for example, believe that we can only know something about an event by having direct experience with it. Other students believe that since there is only one past event (or a series of events) that actually occurred, there can only be one true description of it (Lee & Carretero, 2014). Students also are likely to view people in the past as being fundamentally similar to people today (for example in terms of values and beliefs) and as such are predisposed to explain human action and behavior through their own lenses or present-day sets of values or beliefs. Such “presentist” ways of thinking and everyday notions of how things work may not help them make sense of human actions and events that occurred in the distant past.

Additionally, historical thinking as a cognitive activity is far more sophisticated and demanding than mastering substantive (content) knowledge (Levesque, 2009). The disposition to think historically requires more than the ability to know or reproduce historical knowledge; it also expects the learner to acquire the competency in, and having a keen understanding of, the procedures used to investigate different aspects of history or the competing interpretations that arise from a study of the past. While helping students think historically about the past is a challenging endeavour and one that is not without its problems, developing students’ dispositions and ability to view the past on its own terms has merit. In preparing students for the 21st century and equipping them with the necessary skills, knowledge and dispositions to manage the challenges of “new times,” learning history should move beyond simply recounting facts or knowing a given/fixed narrative; it should also engage students with the ability to think critically and inventively about the past. As Levstik and Barton argued,

If history helps us think about who we are and to picture possible futures, we cannot afford a history curriculum mired in trivia and limited to a chronological recounting of events. We need a vibrant history curriculum that engages children in investigating significant themes and questions, with people, their values, and the choices they make as the central focus (Levstik & Barton, 2011)

The new curriculum for school history in Singapore (introduced in 2013 for the Upper Secondary History students and in 2014 for the Lower Secondary History students) signalled a move towards a discipline-oriented, inquiry-based approach to the Humanities. The syllabuses were designed to get students to come to grips with the nature of the historical discipline – its structure, attributes and ways of knowing – and positioned historical understanding at the heart of history teaching and learning (Afandi, 2013). The goal of the history curriculum was to “develop in the History learner a reasoned, inquiring, methodical and discerning mind, capable of demonstrating a balanced perspective and having a disposition for empathetic understanding in history and develop students’ understanding of historical concepts and build their competencies in historical skills” (Upper Secondary History Teaching and Learning Guide, 2012, p. 20). In line with this objective, instructional materials and teaching resources were constructed to support teachers in planning schemes of work, designing instructional strategies and
devise assessment structures that can guide them towards the development of the intended competencies and disciplinary understandings.

While resources\(^1\), teaching packages and strategies play an important role in helping teachers deliver the curricular intent, teaching students to think historically is not a matter of simply utilising available material to deliver instructions in the history classrooms. Teaching students to develop deeper understandings about history and build historical thinking skills involves a commitment on the part of teachers to develop their own knowledge bases. By equipping themselves with the necessary skills and disciplinary knowledge to understand the nature of historical knowledge, teachers can more confidently design curriculum and pedagogical strategies that foster historical thinking in students (Barton & Levstik, 2011). To improve instructional expertise, well-designed PD is critical in helping teachers master content and hone teaching skills, as well as evaluate performance (both their own and their students’) and address changes needed in teaching and learning in their schools (Darling-Hammond, 2009). Equally crucial is for teachers to develop an understanding of their own assumptions, educational beliefs and classroom practices, as these are likely to affect the kinds of curriculum decisions they make and the manner in which they execute their craft.

**PD for History teachers: The History Master Class**

Teacher professional development (PD) in Singapore is provided by three main providers: the National Institute of Education (NIE), the Academy of Singapore Teachers (AST) and six Centres of Excellence and schools (Bautista, Wong, & Gopinathan, 2015). In the context of developing a sound PD structure that can help equip teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to conduct lessons that foster historical thinking, the two History Master Teachers at the AST, Mr. Andrew Anthony and Mr. Lloyd Yeo, collaborated with Dr. Suhaimi Afandi, a History lecturer NIE, to design and conduct a Master Class workshop for Senior Teachers (STs) and Lead Teachers (LTs) of History. As the STs and LTs were already familiar with historical concepts and ways to teach them\(^ii\), the aim of the Master Class was to build deeper understandings of two key historical concepts, namely, Causation and Accounts, and to subsequently develop instructional strategies to teach these concepts to students.

The design for the Master Class drew reference from research on effective PD. Some of the general key characteristics of effective PD (Fishman, 2014) are as follows:

- Extended duration rather than a single seminar or “one-shot” workshop
- Emphasis on content knowledge with a focus on student learning
- Coherence with respect to standards, expectations, or other initiatives teachers are experiencing
- Space for teachers to examine and reflect on their own practice
- Opportunities for teacher collaboration and social support systems
- Close coupling to anticipated or desired classroom practice so that teachers are able to easily interpret and translate PD messages to their own classrooms.

In addition to the characteristics highlighted above (which are generic to the design of PD workshops for any subject or field of study), the Master Class
PD design for the history STs and LTs also took into consideration the focus on developing the multidimensionality of history teachers’ knowledge bases.

**Figure 1.** History Teachers Knowledge Base (Husbands, 2011)

![Diagram of History Teachers Knowledge Base]

As indicated in the above framework (Figure 1), each element in the model (Knowledge about subject, Knowledge about classroom practices and Knowledge about pupils) draws on specific components that builds on each knowledge base. These elements operate within a dynamic environment and form an interdependent relationship that makes up a history teacher’s knowledge bases. PD designs which place subject-matter knowledge alone at the core usually fail to capture the inter-relationship and dynamism of the different sorts of knowledge which history teachers routinely deploy in their classrooms (Husbands, 2011). The model suggested above strongly advocates the idea that learning to teach history not only involves the acquisition of subject-matter knowledge but also other kinds of knowledge critical to a history teacher’s competency (as shown in the framework). Designing an effective PD structure for history teachers would need to take this inter-relationship into consideration if it hopes to develop and strengthen a history teacher’s knowledge base.

Drawing on research around effective PD, the Master Class was designed to allow teachers to work together so that they would gain practical experience in constructing lesson strategies that could help their students explore, interpret and understand the past using the tools of disciplined historical inquiry. The workshop was conducted over three
sessions with Dr. Afandi acting as the main facilitator and the Master Teachers playing the role of co-facilitators. The specific details regarding the Master Class can be found in Annex 1, but the intention behind the design may be worth highlighting here:

- to create an intellectual space for teachers to analyse and identify key problems and challenges when developing lesson strategies to teach the historical concepts of “causation” and “accounts”;
- to set aside time for teachers to work collaboratively to develop lesson ideas, teaching strategies and actual instructional materials for use in the history classroom; and
- to provide an opportunity for teachers to implement these lesson ideas, critically evaluate instructional aspects, and collectively suggest ways to improve their lesson strategies and teaching resources.

**Purpose of study**

While reference to academic literature guided the design and planning of the history Master Class, we also wanted to find out the extent to which the Master Class helped bring about changes (if any) in teachers’ classroom practice and their knowledge and beliefs regarding the PD content (i.e. the teaching of Causation and Accounts). In addition, we also wanted to identify which aspects of the Master Class PD had contributed to some of these changes. The research questions that supported our inquiry were:

1. Did the Master Class bring about changes in teachers’ classroom practice, knowledge and beliefs regarding the PD content?

2. What aspects of the Master Class contributed to the changes in teachers’ classroom practice, knowledge and beliefs regarding the PD content?

**Methodology**

In order to find out whether the Master Class impacted teacher classroom practice, knowledge and beliefs regarding the PD content, a mixed methods research and triangulated design was used to assess the impact of the PD on the participants. Quantitative data through written questionnaires was first collected and analyzed for preliminary patterns or trends that could point towards potential changes in participants’ knowledge, practice and beliefs. These initial findings were subsequently used to inform the design of semi-structured interviews intended to generate qualitative data for the study. Out of the twenty teachers who attended the Master Class, sixteen attended all three sessions. For consistency, data was gathered only from these sixteen participants, all of whom had at least five years of experience teaching history. 70% of the participants were teacher leaders who held formal appointments as Senior Teachers or Lead Teachers; the other 30% comprised Heads of Department and serving teachers with five or more years of teaching experience.

**Data collection**

In the initial phase of the study, two surveys were administered to find out the impact of the Master Class on participants’ PD experiences. The first survey was administered prior to the start of the first session to uncover teachers’ initial thinking about the PD content, and the second survey was administered at the end of the third session to see if participants’ ideas or beliefs about PD content have
changed. Specifically, the surveys comprised a series of statements that pointed to teachers’ self-perception about their knowledge, practice and beliefs regarding the PD content, using a 7-point Likert scale of ‘1 for strongly agree’, ‘2 for agree’, ‘3 for somewhat agree’, ‘4 for neutral’, ‘5 for somewhat disagree’, ‘6 for disagree’, and ‘7 for strongly disagree’. Data was analyzed quantitatively and preliminary findings were developed.

In the qualitative phase of the research design, two participants (Ms Y and Ms Z) were interviewed using a semi-structured interview format with questions focusing on how the Master Class had impacted their learning regarding the PD content. The interviews were transcribed and data were analysed qualitatively. The emergent themes, sub-themes and categories describing the phenomena were further triangulated with qualitative data taken from the standard feedback form routinely given at the end of any PD workshop conducted by the AST.

Research findings

Quantitative findings

Survey findings from 16 participants were used to answer the first question, “Did the Master Class bring about changes in teachers’ classroom practice, knowledge and beliefs regarding the PD content?”

By means of statistical software, a paired-sample t-test on the raw data collected was conducted to compare the mean scores of the same group before the first session of the Master Class (pre-class survey) and at the end of the third session of the Master Class (post-class survey) to analyse changes in these domains (Knowledge, Practice and Beliefs). The results are illustrated in Table 1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Survey 1 (pre-class)</th>
<th>Survey 2 (post-class)</th>
<th>Difference in Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>(Survey 1 - Survey 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge (Causation)</td>
<td>2.48 (0.61)</td>
<td>1.62 (0.42)</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge (Accounts)</td>
<td>2.73 (0.59)</td>
<td>1.65 (0.55)</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice of PD content</td>
<td>1.31 (0.39)</td>
<td>1.56 (0.44)</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in PD content</td>
<td>1.46 (0.51)</td>
<td>1.46 (0.50)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From the results (in Table 1), we can see that there had been a noticeable improvement in the ‘Knowledge’ domain. The differences in means before and after the Master Class are 0.86 and 1.08 for Knowledge (Causation) and Knowledge (Accounts) respectively. Both differences are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This showed that the teachers had acquired a better understanding of how to teach the concepts of Causation and Accounts as a result of attending the Master Class.

Although there were no statistically significant improvements in the ‘Practice’ and ‘Belief’ domains, it is important to note that for the two domains, participants had already indicated a high level of agreement in the ‘Practice’ of PD content (M=1.31) and ‘Belief’ in PD content (M=1.46) respectively (in the pre-class survey before the first session). As such, we did not expect statistically significant improvements in these 2 domains. These initial high levels of agreement were also not unexpected because of the profile of the participants. Participation in the Master Class was not offered to the entire history teacher fraternity and invitations were extended to mainly teacher leaders. Given their profile, the participants would be more likely to already have a positive attitude towards the ‘Practice’ and ‘Belief’ aspects of the PD content. Moreover, participants’ commitment to attending this relatively long-duration Master Class (one full day and two half days stretched over two months) pointed to their positive attitude towards this PD, which also could account for their high level of agreement.

The qualitative findings from the interviews and data derived from the standard feedback form were used to answer the second question, “What aspects of the Master Class contributed to the changes in teachers’ classroom practice, knowledge and beliefs regarding the PD content?”

Conscious practice

With regard to the ‘Practice’ domain, an analysis of the data highlighted the importance of active, hands-on and conscious practice of the strategies taught at the Master Class session. This hands-on experience (i.e. trying out the strategy during the Master Class itself) played a part in encouraging participants to try out what they have learnt in their own school context.

Ms Y, a teacher with five years of experience, shared that her teaching had previously focused mainly on content and the teaching of examination skills. However, the lively discussions during the Master Class workshops and hands-on practice regarding the explicit teaching of historical thinking through authentic strategies (e.g. card sort activity) allowed her to understand “why we are doing what we are doing” and “what are the strategies to implement in class”. She tried out the card-sort activity in her school context to teach the concept of causation and shared:

“We hear about it (the new syllabus) but for me, I didn’t have an idea of how we are going to carry it out, how we do it. For me, the Master Class was like a life changing (experience) because you understand the meaning behind why we are doing what we are doing. Secondly, you know what are the strategies to implement in class.”

Even after the Master Class, she continued to try out the card sort activity for the different content areas.

What kind of practice works best when it comes to PD design? Drawing from cognitive learning principles of mass vs. distributed practice found in the domains...
of psychology, the interview data suggest that conscious practice and attempts made at further pedagogical innovation needs to be interspersed with periods of rest (i.e. distributive practice) which can lead to better acquisition and retention of teaching skills compared with practice delivered in continuous blocks with little or no rest in between (i.e. massed practice) (Marzano, 2001).

**Collaboration and support systems**

The qualitative feedback from the interviews also suggested that a strong emphasis placed on collaboration allowed participants to gain a deeper knowledge of how to teach these historical concepts. The data from the end-of-course feedback indicated that the opportunity to share and discuss different ideas, as well as the generous sharing of resources and collaboration beyond the workshop sessions, allowed participants to develop “critical friendships” (Costa & Kallick, 1993) to engage positively with the experience of planning of lessons, developing resources, teaching lessons and reflecting on their teaching and learning practices.

Ms Y shared that she liked the “brainstorming and getting ideas” aspect of the Master Class as it allowed participants to hear different perspectives,

> “Honestly, if we didn’t share, we would not learn. The sharing was impactful because we asked questions, we brought up real challenges and most importantly, everybody came together and we helped one another to sharpen it (the lesson strategies) to make it better.”

Ms Z, an experienced Senior Teacher, had similar experiences and shared how she appreciated the collaborative nature of the Master Class,

> “It was good to hear that we were not alone in our struggles to try something new. Everyone struggles when learning new things and the important thing for us was to learn from those struggles.”

**Opportunity to implement in the classroom: Positive impact on student learning**

Anecdotal evidence from the interviews also suggested that students’ enjoyment of the strategies tried out in the classroom helped to reinforce the teachers’ belief in the PD content, and reassured them that their practices made a difference to their students’ learning of history students. Ms Y related an experience of students walking with her to the staffroom, continuing the discussion on causation which they had started during class. Similarly, Ms Z shared that after trying out the strategies in her lessons on accounts,

> “…the Sec 5N students felt that historians had their own inquiry questions they were trying to answer. The historian’s context was different. So they selected sources which they deemed as reliable. My students also went on to ask questions about the reliability of the data and evidence they used, asking questions about how useful a particular evidence is and how it relates to the question.”

Ms Z found that her lessons had increased her students’ motivation level and she was also able to get her history teachers at the Secondary One and Secondary Two levels to try out some of the strategies. In her interview, she shared that,

> “Both teachers and students
benefited but it also allows for more confusion (laughs). It is part of the learning curve but I must say that the Sec Ones are getting used to it.”

**Teacher satisfaction with conceptual clarity and concrete teaching strategies**

The participants in the Master Class reported that their knowledge gains included greater clarity in terms of understanding historical thinking. They appreciated how theory and practice were bridged with clear conceptual understanding of historical concepts and concrete teaching strategies (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Ms Y shared that the conceptual clarity and concrete role-modelling of lessons allowed her to “visualize, experience and then go back to think about how I am going to use this in class”.

Ms Z shared that before the workshop, she was already aware of the concept of historical accounts but in the past, her focus was on why historians wrote the account in the way that they did. There was no comparison of different accounts. However, the Master Class gave her greater conceptual clarity and changed her classroom practices. Table 2 below demonstrated an illustration of her changed practice as derived from the interview:

**Table 2. A demonstration of Ms Z’s changed practice before and after the Master Class**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Before Master Class</th>
<th>After Master Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use of accounts</td>
<td>No comparison across accounts</td>
<td>Comparisons across accounts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic/ Theme</td>
<td>Tendency to use school experiences and events to engage students</td>
<td>Confidence in using larger historical events to engage students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of historical context</td>
<td>Lack of conscious use of historical context</td>
<td>Conscious use of historical context</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion**

The findings from this study demonstrate the potential of how PD could be organised to bring about positive changes in a teacher’s practice when teaching historical concepts.

**Site-embedded professional development design**

Beyond just the single workshop focused on the transmission of the PD content, PD designs could also consider site-embedded professional development which can impact classroom teaching in a situated and authentic context (Borko, 2004; Gusky & Kwang, 2009). This was demonstrated in the Master Class design where allowing teachers to co-learn, co-construct and co-experiment with the new teaching ideas in teams arguably led to greater goal orientation and pedagogical innovations in their lessons to teach the concepts of causation and accounts.

Such PD designs could provide teachers with greater opportunities to question their own classroom pedagogies more meaningfully, provide social and learning spaces for feedback to be gathered and for positive learning outcomes to be celebrated. In so doing, this reinforces participant belief in how PD can change
practice in the history classroom.

**Differentiated professional development design**

All the participants had at least 5 years of teaching experience and the quantitative data showed that many of them came with a strong belief in how PD would impact their classrooms. The initial survey also showed that many of them had some understanding of historical thinking which we believed helped them implement the classroom interventions successfully in their specific contexts.

One of the interviewees shared,

“It is good that many of the participants were mainly STs and experienced teachers. I think we would have a certain grasp of things and our teaching methods and experience gave us some advantage in trying it out. As a new teacher, because such ideas are new, they might struggle a bit and try to follow (what was taught) as closely as possible without making the needed adjustments to fit their students.”

The insight revealed through this teacher’s sentiment pointed to the suggestion that if differentiated instruction works for diverse student learning needs, such an approach may also apply to teacher professional development and learning (Bowgren & Sever, 2010). This fits well with findings from studies which concluded that teacher personal epistemologies often serve as filters, frames, and guides for their teaching practice. These in turn affect their perception of reality, especially in developing a sense of efficacy belief or motivational constructs to influence their willingness to take action in their classrooms (Fives & Buehl, 2012).

**Taking into consideration teacher beliefs and change ideas**

The PD design also needs to start from and work at teacher conceptual understanding and change. This involves enabling participants to see how concepts are translatable into concrete teaching practices and strategies. This is important because teachers often operate with deeply ingrained and set conceptualizations about the nature of knowledge, the process of learning and the role of a teacher in impacting changes for learners through teaching experiences (Fives & Buehl, 2012). As a result, the suggestion is for PD design to have at least three cognitive processes which are deemed essential for conceptual change (Patrick & Pintrich, 2001):

a) Metacognitive awareness or the recognition that previous belief is not satisfactory (e.g. Need to teach historical thinking and going beyond skills and content)

b) Ability to engage with new learning at a deep level of processing (e.g. Teaching accounts and causation using concrete strategies)

c) Ability to engage in practice and scientific thinking about the information (i.e. develop and test ideas or hypothesis); (e.g. online support and coming back to plan and share lesson ideas)

Such PD design could perhaps allow for teachers to incorporate new learnings so that their prior beliefs can be accommodated or potentially (and dramatically) transformed (Alongi, Heddy, & Sinatra, 2012; Limon, 2002).

**Conclusion**

Teaching history to students is not simply about getting them to learn fixed
historical narratives or having them commit to memory factual knowledge about the past. Many history education researchers would argue that students needed to be taught aspects of the historical discipline if they were to develop proper understandings about how knowledge about the past has been constructed. For teachers to do this well, they would need to deepen their own disciplinary understandings, and become more familiar and proficient at dealing with second-order ‘historical concepts’ such as ‘accounts’, ‘evidence’, ‘significance’, ‘causation’, ‘empathy’ and ‘diversity’ (MOE, 2012). ‘Capacity-building’ measures (such as providing teachers with access to training courses, workshops and resources) aimed at deepening teachers’ disciplinary foundation and equipping them with a stronger understanding of second-order concepts in history, are critical if teachers are to competently manage students’ learning experiences. An effective PD structure that is designed to develop history teachers’ knowledge bases, transform their beliefs about history learning, and raise teaching competencies to improve classroom practice, will be critical in effecting important changes that are in line with a history curriculum that is discipline-based and inquiry-driven.

Even though this is a very small-scale study of 16 participants, the authors believe that the findings have important implications for PD design and provide insights on ways to think about participant conceptual change. Some of these include:

a) Planning and designing for conceptual focus, conscious practice and belief change
b) Planning for collaboration and support systems
c) Designing for conscious practice focused on classroom instruction
d) Site-embedded PD and classroom practice
e) Space for feedback, critique and celebration

We believe that these guidelines can be useful as a basis upon which further PD work can be devised and structured. It is hoped that the limited findings from this initial small-scale study would help teacher educators, curriculum leaders and staff developers consider more effective ways to design PD modules or workshops that can help history teachers develop deeper understandings about historical concepts and the ways to teach these concepts to students, thereby raising the level of historical thinking and discourse that takes place in our classrooms.

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i Examples of resources are: (a) material found in the Upper and Lower Secondary History Teaching and Learning Guides produced by the History Unit, Curriculum Planning and Development Division (b) The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts, by Peter Seixas and Tom Morton. Toronto, ON: Nelson Education, 2013 (c) Teaching History Journal of The Historical Association (UK)

ii Since 2012, many workshops/ courses have been organized for history teachers regarding the teaching of historical concepts aimed at supporting the implementation of the new history syllabuses.

iii Based on 7-point Likert scale of ‘1 for strongly agree, ‘2 for agree’, ‘3 for somewhat agree’, ‘4 for neutral’, ‘5 for somewhat disagree’, ‘6 for disagree’, and ‘7 for strongly disagree’.