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Teaching for Historical Understanding (TfHU): Developing a Discipline-based Curriculum Model at Tanjong Katong Secondary School

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Abstract

This paper reports the experiences of the History Unit at Tanjong Katong Secondary School (TKSS) in their attempts to craft a discipline-based curriculum model focusing on instruction that develops students' historical understandings. The paper describes the project structure and development of the Tanjong Katong (TK) Teaching for Historical Understanding (TfHU) approach to historical instruction, shares some reflections by teacher participants involved in the project, and highlights several learning points and implications for curriculum change at TKSS. The history teachers at TKSS recognised that the TfHU project had further developed their awareness of more effective methods to teach history, and were confident that the focus on disciplinary understandings will enhance student engagement in their history classrooms. They demonstrated strong belief that students can be made to understand complex issues in history if they are given the proper tools or cognitive challenges suitably crafted to develop deeper thinking about aspects of the discipline.

Introduction

Recent efforts to address apparent shortcomings in the teaching and learning of history in schools have seen remarkable changes in the way the national history curriculum has been conceived. Across all age and academic levels (lower secondary, upper secondary and post-secondary) history instruction has shifted towards an approach that is *inquiry-based*, and one that focuses on the development of students' historical understanding (MOE, 2012). At its best, a curriculum that uses historical inquiry as a pedagogical framework, supports it with ample opportunities for students to engage in rich tasks that are structured to develop disciplinary ideas about history, and provides teachers with interventionist strategies or scaffolds to help manage students' preconceptions is more likely to develop deeper historical understandings among its learners. Designing a framework for curriculum development with progression in mind would serve not only as a focal point for thinking about ways to improve students' ideas about history, but also offer opportunities for formative assessment strategies that are targeted at moving students' ideas forward. Yet, how far have schools embraced the idea of

history education as one that deepens students' ideas and understandings about the historical discipline? To what extent has inquiry been successful in fostering students' thinking and understanding in history? Has historical instruction in local classrooms changed in a way that has seen a shift from content aggregation and accumulation to one that focuses on providing students with opportunities to develop disciplinary practices and conceptual understandings? These are important questions that require addressing, but ones that may not be sufficiently tackled within the scope of the current paper. Instead, this paper reports the experiences of the History Unit at Tanjong Katong Secondary School (TKSS) and their attempts to craft a discipline-based curriculum model that placed focus on instruction that develops students' historical understandings. The paper describes the project structure and development of the Tanjong Katong (TK) Teaching for Historical Understanding (TfHU) approach to historical instruction, shares some reflections by teacher participants who went through the process of undertaking to teach for understanding, and highlights several learning points and implications for curriculum change at TKSS.

The goals of school history

The goals of history in schools, as Denis Shemilt (1980) proposed in his Evaluation Study of the Schools History Project (SHP) in the United Kingdom (UK), should both be about fostering a deep understanding of the *past*, and a deep understanding of *history*. Not only should students be given opportunities to understand the variety, the difference, the strangeness of life in the past, the interplay of continuity and change, the multiple causes and consequences of events, and the role of individuals, collectivities and

states, they also should understand the processes of knowledge-making, the construction of a historic narrative or argument, the uses of evidence, and the nature of conflicting historical accounts. Such a proposal pointed to the importance of teaching history in ways that can assist and raise the level of adolescent learning. It called for the replacement of traditional pedagogies with inquiry models of disciplinary-based practice (Shemilt, 1980) that can assist in developing students' historical understandings.

As the recommended pedagogy for historical instruction in Singapore schools, inquiry was seen as key to transforming a largely content-centred approach to history teaching and learning into one that gets students to “appreciate the underpinnings of the discipline” (MOE, 2012). Embedded within the history curriculum are eight historical concepts that are deemed central to the development of disciplinary understandings: accounts, causation, change, chronology, empathy, evidence, significance and diversity. Depending on the academic levels of historical study in schools, the aims of history involves not only helping students acquire historical knowledge, but also equipping them with a conceptual apparatus to understand the nature of the discipline: for example,

- knowing how we come to know something about the past;
- understanding how accounts about past events are written;
- recognising that there can be different interpretations or multiple versions of the same event;
- explaining why/how something happened and its repercussions or significance in history;
- recognising that events have multiple causes, and can lead to multiple consequences;
- understanding the nature of

evidence and how it is used to construct knowledge about the past;

- understanding why there are different claims made by history;
- knowing how these claims can be tested against each other; and so on.

Yet, despite the changes that are meant to promote critical thinking in history, successful implementation of the new curriculum will be limited if methods of teaching still pursue a traditional teacher-centred approach; simply giving students the stories they should know may not be the best way to get them to learn history (see Shemilt, 1980 and Lee, 1999). Research evidence in the UK clearly indicated that teaching substantially modified, or changed students' ideas (Shemilt, 1980; Lee, Ashby, & Dickinson, 1996; Lee & Ashby, 2000), and as such, important historical understandings and dispositions (such as those mentioned above) have to be developed in the classroom. Equally important, is the recognition that a teacher's grasp of the principles and processes of history teaching will likely affect the growth and quality of adolescents' historical reasoning (Shemilt, 1980). Explicit concept-related teaching and historical instruction that give students exposure to a way of thinking about the nature of historical knowledge in provisional and propositional terms – as sets of ideas or proposals open to debate and conjecture – would be critical in enhancing and transforming student understandings in history.

Teaching for Historical Understanding (TfHU) Project at Tanjong Katong Secondary School

One of the key ideas underlying TKSS' Teaching for Historical Understanding (TfHU) project is the recognition that understanding history requires that students acquire and use knowledge about

history in ways that can allow them to make sense of the past, beyond mere memorisation and regurgitation of facts and figures. The act of *understanding* history entails a process where students acquire knowledge, develop skills, and apply key historical concepts in the context of an inquiry into the past. This focus on developing a level of understanding – one that can serve TKSS students while in school and throughout their lives – cuts across many subject areas in the Tanjong Katong (TK) Curriculum.

Context

The TK Curriculum aims to develop students who are self-directed learners and passionate about each and every pursuit they undertake. The model TK graduate is one who is confident, resilient and flexible, and one who is guided by sound values to lead and contribute to school, nation and the global community. To support the development of such graduates, the TK Curriculum is designed to equip students with discipline-based literacies as well as other knowledge literacies such as ICT-competency, 21st century learning skills and social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies. TKSS teachers are consequently expected to acquire a high level of disciplinary expertise and be competent in their respective subject areas.

In the teaching and learning of history, the common challenge facing most history teachers in TKSS revolves around ways to approach historical instruction that builds and extends students' historical understanding. Often, teachers are likely to teach history by prioritising or placing heavy emphases on syllabus requirements and content acquisition. Although these teachers use questions to prompt students to think more critically about past events, students are seldom given adequate opportunities to apply important historical

concepts to an investigation of a specific historical event. The kinds of conventional teaching that takes place in TK history classrooms frequently lacked an investigative element, and hardly offered students opportunities to engage with the past in “disciplinary” ways. Consequently, such instruction often falls short of achieving “historical understanding” goals. More recently, history teachers at TKSS have begun to recognise that effective teaching in history requires that they focus on an instruction that fosters students’ understanding of the discipline. To achieve this goal, these teachers acknowledged the need to strengthen subject matter expertise, to develop sound understanding of historical concepts and historical thinking skills, and to build up competencies in designing pedagogical tools to support the development of students’ historical understanding.

Aims/goals of the project

To equip teachers with the necessary pedagogical tools to approach the teaching and learning of history in more effective ways, the TK History unit decided to embark on their “Teaching for Historical Understanding” (TfHU) project. They engaged Dr. Suhaimi Afandi from NIE (HSSE) as a consultant and formulated a professional development (PD) design that supported the development of a discipline-based curriculum model for the teaching of history across all educational levels at TKSS. The aims of the project included:

- to develop teachers’ understanding of the nature of historical knowledge,
- to equip teachers with pedagogical tools to approach the teaching of historical concepts in a way that can develop students’ historical understanding,

- to develop (with teachers) lesson designs, learning goals, teaching strategies and instructional materials that can foster students’ understanding in history, and
- to equip teachers with the knowledge to construct a curriculum model based on a Teaching for (Historical) Understanding framework in an ongoing and sustainable way.

In pursuing a department-wide approach to teach history with understanding goals in mind, the TK History Unit identified the desired student outcomes as follows:

- To develop students into **confident persons**: Through the project, students will be able to develop sound understanding of history and hone historical skills that would assist them in managing historical knowledge in a confident way. By approaching history as a disciplined inquiry into the past, students will develop greater confidence when dealing with aspects related to historical methodology, such as: when evaluating sources as pieces of evidence, when identifying and analysing different interpretations of the past, and when putting forward a well-substantiated argument to support a claim about an event in the past.

To support students’ development into **self-directed learners**: The inquiry-based and concept-driven lessons will allow students to develop historical skills and conceptual understandings that can support their intellectual growth beyond their secondary school education. They will develop self-autonomy when engaging in future learning experiences and know how

to self-regulate their own thinking, especially when faced with challenges that are history-related. This may be demonstrated through tasks that require them to evaluate multiple sources of information, assess the evidentiary basis of knowledge claims, arrive at supportable, well-balanced conclusions about contentious historical issues, and so on.

The structure of the project takes into consideration the overall aims and expected outcomes, as well as the identification of certain “gaps” that may need to be addressed to ensure the achievement of these goals/outcomes (such as teachers’ level of disciplinary expertise, subject matter competency, and other capacity-building aspects). Broadly, the project involved three phases.

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Figure 1. Project structure and design

Phases	Nature of work
Phase 1	The first phase of the project is a capacity-building phase that also served as PD for the history teachers. It consisted of two 3-hr sessions of training for all Upper and Lower Secondary History teachers on aspects related to Teaching for Understanding, the purpose of TK’s Teaching for Historical Understanding (TfHU) framework, the nature of historical knowledge and historical concepts that underpin the discipline (such as Causation, Accounts, Significance, Evidence and Chronology), and demonstrations of some TfHU strategies related to the concepts being discussed. The training sessions were aimed at developing teachers’ competency and also served to convince teachers on the value of the TfHU implementation.
Phase 2	Following the training session, the second phase focused on coaching and mentoring of teachers as they designed learning sequences or a series of learning activities that supported the teaching of a particular topic. This phase of the consultancy involved the coaching of one Secondary 1 and two Secondary 3 History teachers in aspects of lesson planning and the (micro-)teaching of the planned lessons. The teachers were guided in the development of TfHU lesson strategies and given pointers and feedback on their planned lessons. Each teacher designed a TfHU lesson package, consisting of three 1-hr lessons, based on the level the teacher was teaching. Together with the consultant, the team of Sec 1 and 3 teachers observed one another’s lessons. A total of nine lesson observations were made (with each teacher running a three-lesson sequence for the taught topic). Developmental comments were thereafter provided to enable the team to continuously revise and improve the TfHU lesson packages.
Phase 3	Upon completion of the coaching and consultancy phase, the TKSS History teachers evaluated the effectiveness of the TfHU approach and discussed ways to move forward and further leverage on the PD experience. Teachers reflected and assessed the effectiveness of their lessons, the depth of the students’ responses, the challenges and opportunities of utilising a TfHU framework for student learning, and suggested improvements for future teaching and learning practices using the approach.

The design of the TfHU framework at TKSS was based on work done by leading proponents of the Teaching for Understanding project at Harvard Graduate School of Education (see Wiske, 1998; Blythe, 1998; Perkins, 1993) that focused on a pedagogy of understanding. In supporting a framework that focuses on the development of *historical* understandings, however, adaptations were made to the design. Nevertheless, the key guidelines and throughlines remained essential to the formulation of TK's TfHU framework:

1) The first consideration that took place in the planning of the framework involved asking questions about the purpose or goal of learning. Before teachers can respond to any call to teach for understanding, they would need to be clear in their responses to some of these questions:

What are some possible generative topics you can teach?

Consider:

- What is worth understanding about this topic?
- How can we foster understanding?
- What important information or ideas that students must understand about this topic?
- How can we tell what students understand?
- What skills do you want students to develop/apply to demonstrate understanding?

What are some understanding goals?

Consider:

- What questions/throughlines can you use to help students understand what they are learning and why?
- What skills do you want students to develop, and what partial understandings can they demonstrate?
- What knowledge do you want students to acquire, and how would this help students better understand the issue/topic/event?
- What concept do you want your students to know, and how would this help students better understand the issue/topic/event?

At this stage of the TfHU planning process, teachers clarified the kinds of understandings they would like to achieve in teaching the topic they have identified. The example below provides an illustration of how the teachers went about the planning process. In this example, the teachers did several things: they selected a generative topic to be taught, identified the "big idea" they wanted to teach and the rationale for the teaching of that "big idea", highlighted the understanding goals (which were couched in conceptual terms, i.e. Causation), explained the reasons for studying the reasons for Stalin's rise to power, raised questions that students should think about in the course of the lessons, identified the skills that students were expected to develop by the end of the lesson sequence, and established some connections this topic had to a broader study of the rise of authoritarian governments during the inter-war years.

Figure 2. Lesson plan on Stalin’s rise to power

Lesson Topic: Chapter 2: Stalin’s rise to power	
<p>Generative Topic</p> <p>Big Idea</p>	<p>Rise of authoritarian governments in Europe and East Asia</p> <p>How did 20th century authoritarian governments rise in Europe and Asia during the inter-war years?</p> <p>Context for Big Idea</p> <p>Students need to understand the reasons for the rise of authoritarian rule in Europe and Asia during the inter-war years. Knowing some of these reasons will allow students to appreciate the outbreak of World War 2 which was partly caused by the unchecked ambitions of the authoritarian states. Students will then understand that attempts at world peace are challenged by the interests and ambitions of individuals such as Stalin in Communist Russia. This will help students to understand how totalitarian regimes have brought about benefits and great costs for others.</p>
<p>Understanding goals</p>	<p>Students should be able to understand</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Changes in history are driven by multiple causes: agency and motivation alone may not be sufficient to explain Stalin’s rise to power. (b) Factors – outside the actions of the main historical players – play a part in influencing events and developments in history.
<p>What is worth understanding about the topic of Rise of Stalin?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Stalin was a prominent figure in 20th century history. As leader of the Soviet Union during the inter-war and post-war periods, he was a key player in world politics and was responsible for developing USSR into a superpower rivalling the US in the post-WW2 years. (b) Understanding the reasons and factors that supported his rise to power may provide students with a better idea of how Stalin was able to defeat his rivals and become the supreme Soviet leader. (c) Understanding the rise of Stalin may also shed light on personality traits of 20th century authoritarian leaders, and the ways and means that they used to take advantage of their circumstances and tighten their grip on power.
<p>Questions for students to think about.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) What do you know about authoritarian leaders and the way their governments work?

	<p>(b) What are some personality traits of authoritarian leaders, and how did such leaders gain absolute power?</p> <p>(c) What accounted for Stalin’s rise to power?</p> <p>(d) How far was Stalin’s success in gaining control of the Soviet Union due to his personality and cunning nature?</p> <p>(e) Was Stalin simply a ruthless man or was he a politically astute leader?</p> <p>(f) Was Stalin aided by circumstances at that time and sheer luck or did he engineer his own rise to power?</p>
<p>Skills</p>	<p>Students should be able to</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. identify the factors responsible for the rise of Stalin. 2. classify the causes/factors responsible for Stalin’s rise to power. 3. reason and justify the category they had selected as the most significant in causing Stalin’s rise to power as compared to other categories. 4. demonstrate understanding that there was more than one reason accountable/ responsible for Stalin’s rise to power. Multiple factors were involved in allowing for Stalin’s rise to power.
<p>Making Connections</p>	<p>Studying the impact of the rise of new regimes will help students to appreciate the key forces and developments that challenged world peace in the years between the wars. Key events such as Stalin’s rise to power and establishment of authoritarian rule in Soviet Union will allow students to understand the reason why Soviet Union was involved in WW2.</p>

2) The second consideration that took place involved asking questions concerning acceptable evidence of student learning. After identifying the broader purpose of the topic to be taught, the teachers considered the means to collect evidence to demonstrate that students have acquired the historical knowledge, understanding or dispositions and proficiency in the historical skills identified. Some questions that helped them with the planning and design include:

What are some possible ongoing assessment opportunities?

Consider:

- What performance task or assessment opportunities can I use to gather information about student understanding?
- Will the evidence of learning come in the form of completed short activities, or will there be a larger culminating project?
- What criteria will help me and my students figure out what they do/do not understand?
- How can I give students feedback on their progress toward developing understanding?
- How can I help students assess their own work?

3) The third consideration that took place involved planning the most appropriate activities and selecting (or crafting) relevant resources that can help students achieve the stated learning/understanding goals. In considering the best teaching and learning activities, the teachers took into account important aspects such as classroom profiles, academic levels, ability levels, students' stage of intellectual development, and so on. In ensuring that the activities designed could cater to a range of learning styles and academic aptitudes, teachers considered some of the questions below:

What are some possible “introductory” understanding performance (or beginning activities)?

Consider:

- How can I best introduce students to the “big questions” or “problems” in this unit?
- What are some ways I can use to raise/surface these questions and issues (in the class)?
- How can I find out what the students already understand/think about the generative topic and understanding goals?

What are some possible “culminating” understanding performance (or main activities)?

Consider:

- What do I want students to understand about the topic? Can students do this activity without understanding?
- How do these activities relate to what I want my students to understand? Do they allow students to apply/extend on what they already know?
- How does this activity allow students to both develop &

demonstrate their understanding?

- What kind of thinking could be incorporated into these activities, and how could they make their thinking visible?

Teacher reflections

A key component of the TfHU project was the continuous reflections on practice that the TK teachers undertook throughout the duration of the project. The consistent reflective process enabled the teachers to assess the effectiveness of their lesson designs such as through regular peer feedback and evaluation, as well as assessment of student responses during in-class activities and through the quality of written submission. Teachers also reflected on their own personal learning experiences in utilising TfHU as a curriculum framework, how these experiences have affected their professional practice, and on ways existing instruction could be improved by pursuing the TfHU approach. The teacher reflections by the individual teachers below provide some indications as to the kinds of experiences they went through during the project.

Liz Sriyanti:

The focus of my TfHU lesson was on developing students' historical understanding through the use of historical concepts – causation and significance – to analyse historical events. I wanted students to use these conceptual lenses to come to an understanding that events in history have multiple causes and can lead to multiple consequences. There were three lessons planned using the TfHU framework and they were designed to provide students with opportunities to examine the different causes that led to the rise of authoritarian rulers. Agency and motivation were causes that

accounted for Stalin's rise to power. But factors, outside the actions of the main historical players, also played a part in influencing events and developments at that time. Students became very much engaged in the lesson activities when given different sources and asked to categorise the different reasons that contributed to the rise of Stalin. On their own, students were able to reach the conclusion that Stalin's rise to power was due to favourable circumstances at the time. The circumstances gave him the opportunity to consolidate his power, aside from his own ruthlessness and political manipulations. I was thrilled that (in the third lesson) my students were able to provide reasoned justification on the significance of one factor in relation to another. This was achieved after several processes were done during lessons – generating active group discussions, consistent prompting of students' responses to develop their understanding, and getting students to complete presentations that were crafted to test their understandings about possible reasons to explain Stalin's rise to power. The development of such understandings had led to better explanatory skills (in the answers students gave in response to the Structured Essay Question), which they previously lacked.

The initial stages of developing the lesson plans as well as the implementation of the lessons were painful but in the end, rather fulfilling. I enjoyed teaching history by building knowledge through self-discovery. The revisions made to lesson plans after each peer lesson observation and successive discussions improved the clarity and effectiveness of the lessons. The TfHU project had provided me

with an enriching teaching and learning experience, and I was able to tap on students' thinking and understanding of the historical knowledge they gained through the process of gathering evidence and exercising reasoning. The preparation for the O levels usually hindered students' interest to learn beyond what was being taught, and most students are predisposed to accepting historical facts as fixed and would reproduce these facts without contemplating, or be critical about, the nature of the knowledge. Approaching lessons through the TfHU framework, however, gave me the opportunity to help students gain an in-depth understanding of how historical facts are derived, and the manner in which historical knowledge was constructed (based on the justification of evidence that were found). At the same time, I was also able to tackle any misunderstandings or misconceptions of what students perceived and make corrective inputs immediately.

Implementing TfHU framework in these three lessons, I found that students were capable of making valid claims and supporting them with reasonable justifications. In addition, students were also able to use the knowledge they acquired from understanding the reasons for the rise to power of authoritarian governments in Europe and Asia and apply these understandings to explain how authoritarian leaders like Stalin and Hitler were able to gain political power in their respective countries. I believe that this was a big leap in my students' learning experience. I found that they were more engaged in the learning process and I think that this approach empowered students to think deeper about historical issues.

Figure 3. Students identify the reasons for Stalin's rise to power



Nani Rahayu

My focus when teaching history had always been on the coverage of content syllabus and developing the skills required to answer examination questions. Like many teachers, I tended to put emphasis on content coverage – sharing the much-entrenched assumption that students needed to know the content in order for them to be able to answer examination questions. Although I am aware of historical concepts such as causation, significance, accounts and evidence, I have not really given much thought to how these concepts are linked to the idea of constructing explanation, or how they can be used to communicate historical knowledge. Before the TfHU project in TK, I have never thought about approaching the teaching of historical concepts as primary learning targets in a history lesson. Today, I am a firm believer in teaching historical concepts to anchor and develop my students' understanding. Many times, we usually teach students the content on its own and do not make an attempt to connect similar case studies together (for e.g. the circumstances surrounding Hitler's and Stalin's emergence as

authoritarian leaders). By anchoring these case studies to a substantive concept (such as 'authoritarian rule') it allows students to make sense of similar patterns when studying factor-based explanations in history (such as the causes that led to the rise of Hitler and Stalin). I think this is the way to help our students make important connections in the syllabus content.

Based on the three TfHU lessons I conducted, the most significant episode worth highlighting took place in the third lesson when I saw for myself the kinds of cognitive struggle students went through as they argued, hesitated, proposed and counter-proposed in the process of making decisions about how best to arrange the information cards provided. As I observed the students struggling to make sense of the knowledge that they should be familiar with but yet seemed unsure, I thought that the whole concept-based task looked like a cognitive puzzle the students had to complete! Some students also seemed to face difficulty trying to come up with a label for each category of the information they had gathered. They were only able to independently identify the categories

as ‘Stalin’s manipulations’ and ‘Favourable circumstances responsible for Stalin’s rise to power’ after much thinking and deliberation. However, one activity that got students to decide the category they felt was most significant to explain Stalin’s rise to power failed to achieve its intended outcome due to an ill-conceived instruction to get students to rank factors. I had not realised that ranking the significance of factors across a horizontal continuum rather than on an ascending continuum would create so much difficulties for students as they could not “see” significance on a straight line continuum. This showed me that establishing connections across a horizontal continuum as compared to an ascending continuum could affect students’ ability to rank the factors. In other words, how students visualise a continuum can affect the way they think and make sense of things!

In reflecting on my overall experience in the TfHU project, I felt it is important for us teachers to firstly understand the attributes of historical concepts we want students to explore in the lessons that we design. When we understand the attributes, it helps us to design the lesson and develop ways that will allow students to make connections between both the substantive and second-order concepts and the content knowledge we want them to acquire. If we don’t give much thought to the way we deploy knowledge, it would affect our students’ understanding of history given that they seemed predisposed to studying historical topics in silos or as distinct or separate episodes of the past.

I also believe that frequent discussions are necessary as we plan the questions we want to use in class. This is so that we can steer the direction of student learning towards the understandings that we want to achieve. In addition, when we discuss the questions and the kinds of expected answers we can get from students, we can achieve some level of visible thinking. But this would require a bit more time and we will need to improve on our facilitation skills in order to achieve higher order historical thinking and understanding.

Even if this was our first experience at teaching for historical understanding (and historical thinking), we thought that the lessons had achieved many positive outcomes. From informal assessment, our students seemed able to understand the topic better and this was also evident in the kinds of writing that they produce. For the first time, we found that students were explaining the reasons for Stalin’s rise to power in their own words rather than writing down memorised answers taken from the textbook. Yet, this is still early days and it is difficult to prove success. Even so, we hope to sustain this initiative and implement another round of improved TFHU lesson design (using a historical concept) to another topic. The high levels of engagement in group-based activities were well worth the effort, and the rich cognitive discussion as well as active classroom interaction makes the process of knowledge deployment and construction one that is owned by the students rather than one prescribed by the teacher.

Figure 4. Students construct explanations for Stalin's rise to power



Sya Feena:

I have always felt that the teaching of history should be more than just teaching content that students memorise and subsequently regurgitate during the examinations. When I started teaching history in 2001, I realised that it was important to make meaning of what I was teaching and to make this content-heavy subject relevant to the students. It was a challenge as I realised that students could not draw coherence and meaning with the topic/issues they were learning. The Teaching for Historical Understanding (TfHU) approach that we have developed at TK have certainly made me rethink my modus operandi. Perhaps, it could be viewed as “the missing element” that would help me find a better way to help students unpack the discipline of history and make learning more purposeful. The approach confirmed my beliefs that learning history is less about memorising facts and more about 'making sense' of the past. Teaching history using the TfHU framework offers students an opportunity to learn to think like a historian, and develop sound

understandings of the discipline. The challenge, however, is in the application and the implementation of effective lessons, and moving away from traditional and didactic forms of history teaching.

The lessons that we've designed with the TfHU framework in mind were constructed for Sec 1 students, crafted to teach students to explore aspects or issues beyond the immediate, and allowing them to think carefully about the interplay of causal factors. The historical concept that anchored the lessons was Causation (push and pull factors), and the focus was on explaining reasons why (and how) people from different parts of the world came to Singapore in the 19th and 20th centuries. As our students can generally be classified as “above average” in ability, we felt that we should stretch them by making some tasks more challenging. Nonetheless, we were clear that the lessons and activities we conducted must provide students with a firm understanding of ‘causation’ – one that we could informally assess after we've run the planned sequence of lessons. We introduced the concept by using a

photograph of an overturned car, had students come up with as many possible causes as part of a trigger activity, and followed this up with a discussion of motivation for migration and movement across geographical space and time periods. The linked activities were successful in introducing students to arrive at an initial understanding that there is usually no single cause to an event, and that events in history are likely to be caused by multiple factors. Students also demonstrated their understanding through a collaborative activity that had them group factors into categories, and then suggesting possible relationships between an array of causes. By the end of the lesson, there were many indications to suggest that the students had been able to relate the concept of causation to the historical event of human migration in the 19th to early 20th centuries.

The three TtHU lessons that I conducted were characterised by active participation and engagement by the students. They found the learning more

meaningful and engaging, especially with group-based, hands-on activities. The students were able to come up with insightful perspectives on why certain events occur, and succeeded in drawing parallels from the trigger activities conducted with the “push and pull factors” surrounding the study of migration and reasons why immigrants came to Singapore during the 19th and 20th centuries. There was a high level of student activity and interaction – the students especially enjoyed brainstorming and categorising the conditions and motivations that led to migration, and why Singapore became a favourable choice. One thing I’ve realised is that it is important to provide students with the proper vocabulary to help them make sense of the phenomenon and express their ideas in a clear way; for example, a variety of words to help students categorise the different ‘causal factors’ would help them better understand the nuances of causal relationships. The right terms will also help them articulate their thought processes better.

Figure 5. Students construct explanations for Stalin’s rise



The personal reflections by the three teachers demonstrated positive outcomes in the way students responded to the teaching of history grounded on historical concepts such as Causation and Significance. Using these conceptual lenses, students were seen to be quite adept at analysing reasons for historical events such as the movement and migration of people to colonial Singapore in the 19th century (for the Sec 1 students) and factors that caused or explained the rise of Stalin in the inter-war years (for the Sec 3 students). Based on the quality of discussions and the written work produced by students in subsequent tasks, there were indications to suggest that the TfHU learning experience had helped made students aware of the multi-causal nature of events that happened in history, allowed them to discover the different terms used in explaining causation (such as “push and pull factors”, “historical agency”, “motivation”, “underlying and trigger factors”), and enabled them to make distinctions between short term and long term effects of events in history.

Learning points

There are several learning points that the teachers at TKSS have found based on their involvement in the TfHU project. These can be briefly summarised as follows:

- 1. A concept-based approach to teaching history will develop deeper historical understandings.*

The teachers found that history can be taught – and taught well – using disciplinary concepts aimed at developing students’ understandings and knowledge of the past. They found that using historical concepts to teach the content in history offered more useful ways of

looking at the past and establish connections in the syllabus content (Nani). The teachers have become more aware of the kinds of misconceptions students may have when trying to make sense of historical knowledge, and are cognizant of the need to work with students’ ideas to promote better ideas and understandings of the past events.

- 2. The use of strategic questioning in the classroom is key to building powerful ideas.*

The teachers also found that the infusion of strategic questioning to scaffold students’ learning and making use of students’ existing ideas to develop further understandings are necessary and highly encouraged (Liz) to promote critical pedagogic practice in the history classroom. A clear line of inquiry, using focused or strategic questioning, and having strong facilitation skills are essential if teachers are to scaffold or guide students towards acquiring more sophisticated ideas and understandings in history. An instruction that is focused on engaging students’ preconceptions will also offer teachers the opportunity to monitor, check and test students’ understandings of the concept/event/issue in more effective ways.

- 3. Devising cognitive activities and developing lesson materials that challenge student thinking are crucial.*

The tasks that teachers design for classroom activities should vary in terms of the intellectual work involved, are challenging and interesting, and be “fit for purpose” (depending on the targeted understanding goals). The teachers found that students are often engaged in hands-on activities if these are well-crafted, offer

them with a cognitive challenge (Nani) and help them understand the idea/issue better. Nonetheless, the teachers are also aware that instructions when running these activities must be effectively given (Nani, Liz & Feena). In addition, teachers would need to be clear about the goals of the activity (such as card-based sorting activities) and the instructional sequence that accompany such activities: for e.g., whether they are used to (a) consolidate students' understandings; (b) make sense of information; or (c) derive headings or categories for a list of 'reasons'/'causes'.

4. Providing space for collaborative work and active thinking enhances the quality of learning.

The teachers found that giving opportunities for students to discuss and work in groups, and to subsequently present their arguments to their peers improved students' learning experiences as they were able to share their thoughts and voice out their opinions on specific issues (Liz). In addition, all three teachers found that students tended to respond more actively to questions when they were in their smaller groups. Group-based activity usually succeeded in igniting students' interest (Feena), and students demonstrated clear and well-grounded thinking when presenting their findings or when responding to queries. This may mean some implications for pedagogy: for e.g. to cut-down on whole class instruction and teacher-directed talk, expand group-based intellectual work, design tasks/activities meant for small group exploration or completion, and spending more time on small-group instruction/interaction.

Conclusion: Developing understandings and implications for curriculum change

The focus on historical understanding, historical methodology and historical thinking gets students closer to the heart of the historical discipline and exposes them to the nature of historical knowledge – how it is constructed and why it is provisional in nature. Yet, developing understandings require time, proper thinking, and sustained effort and commitment. Given the demands and expectation of assessment and the rigours of school life, the TK History Unit must develop a strategy that can both address the goals of TfHU while at the same time adequately prepare students for the national examinations. These goals are not mutually exclusive and can be seen to be mutually-reinforcing; finding the balance between them, however, is key.

TK history teachers agreed that the TfHU project has further developed their awareness of more effective methods to teach history, and deepened their disciplinary knowledge of the subject. They saw a potential shift from a content-dominant approach to teaching, with “disciplinarity” occupying a more equal share in shaping the TK history curriculum. They appeared confident that such a focus will enhance student engagement in their history classrooms. The personal reflections by the three TK teachers also indicated a healthy conviction and commitment to the study of history as a process of inquiry, as a conceptual study of causes and change over time, and as a process of interpretation and (re-) construction. They demonstrated a strong belief that students can be made to understand complex issues in history if they are given the proper tools or cognitive challenges that may situate students' thinking within a recognisable context. These bode well for the TfHU design that TKSS plans to implement as its new curriculum model – one that will guide the direction and shape the TK model of

teaching and learning of history. As intimated by TK's Head of Humanities: "The TfHU project has opened new doors of realisation and opportunities for the teachers and students in TK. It is hoped that with more systematic implementation and infusion of the TfHU approach in the TK History curriculum from next year onwards, the objective of developing the model TK graduate can be further achieved in the future".

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