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A Humanities Signature Programme: The Historian's Lab

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The Historian's Lab, a signature programme developed by the Humanities and Social Studies Education (HSSE) Academic Group, provides students and teachers with opportunities to learn about history in an immersive and experiential way by supporting "historical learning through apprenticeship". Activities are specially crafted to encourage the act of "doing history" through inquiry and with guidance by professional historians at HSSE. The programme bridges the gap between academic and school history by developing strategies to broaden participants' understanding of history as a craft and discipline. By focusing on an understanding of how historians work and the conceptual lenses that support historical ways of viewing the past, the Historian's Lab aims to excite students' classroom experiences through innovative teaching approaches.

Resources, scaffolds and instructional strategies developed in The Historian's Lab are designed to facilitate deeper understandings about the nature of historical knowledge, such as understanding how knowledge about the past is constructed, adjudicated and arbitrated. The Historian's Lab draws on important findings in history education research and attempts to incorporate them into pedagogical structures that support teaching and learning in the history classroom (Lee, 2005; Levstik & Barton, 2015).

Conceptualisations of instructional materials in the Historian's Lab are consistently guided by pertinent aspects of teaching and learning that include:

- » A commitment to disciplined inquiry.
- » A focus on disciplinary concepts.



- » A tilt towards "responsive pedagogy" (Afandi & Baildon, 2009).
- » An eye on progression in learning.

The Historian's Lab Research Agenda

Existing research work has focused on three areas:

Research Focus 1

The first research focus maps out Singapore students' preconceptions about the past and the range of ideas they operate with when making sense of the disciplinary aspects of history.

In exploring students' conceptions about Singapore's past, we found that students were likely to attach "importance" to events based on criteria such as recency and emotional impact. Events such as The Japanese Occupation and Separation from Malaysia—two fairly recent and traumatic experiences in Singapore history—were regarded as the two most important events in Singapore's history, while events that were distant and seemingly detached from current contexts—such as Singapore's pre-1819 origins and the British colonial period—ranked very low in students' list of important events. In addition, students'

responses bore strong correspondence with the national narrative (i.e., the Singapore Story) and their telling of Singapore's past closely resembled the way that narrative was arranged and presented. Constructions of Singapore's past pointed to sequential, trouble-free and uncomplicated development of events, without much mention of discordant, contested or controversial issues/events.

A study on students' understanding of historical causation indicated the possibility of building workable conceptions about causation through a card-based learning device, Singapore Surrenders!. Pre- and post-survey responses showed that students were able to move beyond single (monocausal) or non-related listing of factors, to manifold (multicausal) or multilayered explanations to how/why events occurred. Some students were also able to demonstrate more complex causal hierarchies (beyond linear sequences) and showed increased awareness of multifactorial relationships in studying causal links or networks. Further work and follow-up data analysis will be required to enable us to build higher resolution depictions of progressions in students' ideas/understandings.

Research Focus 2

The second research focus builds an understanding of teachers' conceptions about historical inquiry, the challenges of inquiry-based instruction in the history classroom and the ways some of these challenges can be addressed.

Initial work in this research focus offered a modest description of teacher thinking related to historical inquiry and inquiry-based learning. In isolating specific barriers to inquiry-based instruction, for example, we found that students' perceptions of history as a subject—its "image problem" and the view that the subject involved primarily routinised memory work—affected attitudes and aptitudes towards the study of history as a worthwhile pursuit. Such negative perceptions may be exacerbated by students' lack of readiness (e.g., absent content knowledge and weak academic skills) and teachers' inexperience (e.g., lack of knowledge and requisite skills) to effectively conduct inquiry-based lessons. Larger institutional constraints, such as limited time for inquiry, syllabus coverage, as well as rigid exam structures and the frequency of assessment cycles, posed formidable challenges for historical inquiry.

Some recommendations teachers in the study put forward to help develop a culture of inquiry include:

- » Addressing impediments to pedagogical creativity and innovation.
- » Shifting mindsets and prioritising educational (more than assessment) outcomes.
- » Creating space for authentic inquiry and cognitive experimentation.
- » Building collaborative learning communities that support dialogic exploration of ideas.
- » Strengthening teacher education and continuing professional development.
- » Promoting teacher dialogue and sharing of best practices.

Research Focus 3

The third research focus evaluates the effectiveness of innovative pedagogical devices and their impact on the development of students' historical thinking.

This aspect of the Historian's Lab focuses on the impact the learning portal may offer in developing students' historical thinking. Using a combination of data collection tools, such as cognitive task-sets, student and teacher interviews, pre- and post-surveys, and classroom feedback from our partner schools, we generated findings to help improve existing (and future) learning devices. Feedback was also gathered through presentations at local and international conferences. The use of the Singapore Surrenders! game, for example:

- » increased students' understanding of chronology and grasp of causal relationships in history;
- » led to active and collaborative learning, stimulated the use of prior knowledge and developed students' capacity to make decisions/justifications about causal factors;
- » kept students interested, engaged and wanting to know more about the event;
- » helped introduce new content and supported better recall and retrieval; and
- » made learning fun, exciting and personally relevant.

The Historian's Lab—An Innovative Teaching Approach

The Historian's Lab provides an innovative teaching approach that can transform the way history is taught in schools. It seeks to meet the goals of providing students with positive experiences in the learning of history, while also offering teachers ease of use (of the lesson materials) as they assist students in developing more sophisticated or complex ideas about history and the historian's craft. By focusing on learning history through an "apprenticeship of the craft", students are encouraged to "do history" and become immersed in thinking processes that simulate how historians think, read, write and talk about history.



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