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Title	What is History Teaching and Learning?
Author(s)	H. Doreen Tan
Source	<i>Teaching and Learning</i> , 25(2), 197-206
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

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# What is History Teaching and Learning?

H. Doreen Tan

## Abstract

*This paper focuses on what is the teaching and learning of history. It discusses the nature of the discipline of history and what is meant by historical understanding. It then suggests how the discipline of history can be introduced into the classroom to enhance historical understanding for pupils.*

*“... history is that impossible thing: the attempt to give an account with incomplete knowledge, of actions themselves undertaken with incomplete knowledge ... I taught you that by forever attempting to explain, we may come not to an Explanation but to a knowledge of the limits of our power to explain”.*

Graham Swift<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In classrooms around the world, there is a tendency for history to be taught from textbooks as a body of knowledge that is cast in concrete. Under these circumstances, there is typically only one set answer and students are not expected to question, interpret or form their own opinions about the information that is presented to them. Husbands, Kitson and Pendry (2003) call this method of teaching the “great tradition”. In terms of pedagogy, the great tradition is teacher-centred and the pupils’ role is to receive, digest, organise and replicate or reinterpret what the teacher and the textbook tell them. The problem with teaching history in this manner according to Lee (1999) is that:

- Pupils did not appear to make much sense of the facts
- They quickly forget them
- They encounter different stories outside of school
- Pupils have no guides for thinking about history or coping with competing stories about the past.

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<sup>1</sup>Graham Swift in Husbands, C. (1996). *What is History Teaching?* Buckingham: Open University Press, p. 6.

Moreover, this is not what the discipline of history is about and when students are spoon-fed, historical learning and understanding seldom occurs. As in other subjects, *true* learning occurs when students *understand* the nature of the discipline in which they are involved. If students are to learn history they need to actively construct the past in their minds. Teachers thus need to understand the discipline of history if they intend to ensure that their students learn history.

## Developments in History Education

From the late 1960s onwards there were two major debates on history education in England and elsewhere. One was the debate on history education which has shifted from what content should be taught to questions about what history learning is about (Lee, 1999). In Singapore attempts to make changes in history education in line with this "new" trend in history education started with the revised history syllabus of 1994 (the upper secondary syllabus had not been revised for over 20 years) whereby the skills objectives of history in schools aimed at promoting an understanding of basic historical concepts and introduce students to the nature and uses of historical sources. Another round of syllabus revision to incorporate thinking skills in the school curriculum occurred in 2000. The skills objectives of the new syllabus aim at allowing pupils to understand history in its setting, understand points of view in history, process historical information and develop critical and creative thinking. Thus historical thinking, namely, that part of historical explanation which involves understanding plays a key role in the aims and objectives of these syllabi. To ensure that teachers move beyond content teaching, the assessment of the history papers added in a compulsory source-based question which requires pupils to reflect the skills of historical interpretation and enquiry. The structured-essay component of the paper requires pupils at the highest level to deal with historical significance.

## What is History Teaching and Learning?

The discipline of history is one whereby historians reconstruct the past through a process of enquiry and interpretation of available sources. Thus learning history is more than memorising facts. Pupils of history should actively construct the past in their minds. Just as historians work to give meaning to historical facts so pupils must work to give meaning to their historical experiences if they hope to achieve historical understanding (Bain, 2000). It is not suggested here that pupils be historians but that by "doing" history pupils would reach some form of historical understanding.

Understanding is the ability to think with knowledge within a specific domain. Mansilla and Gardner (1997) mention two dimensions of understanding. The first is understanding of "domain-specific knowledge and the other is understanding of the disciplinary modes of thinking embodied in the methods by which knowledge is constructed, the forms in which knowledge is made public and the purposes that drive inquiry in the domain".

Mansilla and Gardner (1997) consider understanding within a discipline, such as history as a multidimensional process. As such, it goes beyond the specific mastery of one or more symbol systems or the recall of a series of facts. To demonstrate historical understanding, pupils need to be able to use important concepts, findings or theories and go beyond accumulating information and engage in performances that are valued by the communities in which they live. They also need to appreciate the carefully crafted methods and criteria that knowledgeable people have developed to build a comprehensive historical account. They need to appreciate the purposes that inspire the writing of a historical account and they need to use samples of such work to orient their own actions or perceptions of the world.

These methods or processes are called different names by different writers. Some call them second-order concepts, others, disciplinary knowledge and yet others, doing history. Doing history includes concepts of time, evidence, change, causation; empathy, significance and, historical interpretations and enquiry (Haydn, Arthur and Hunt, 1997; Lee, 2001; Dawson, 2003).

Wineburg (1999) claims that historical thinking is neither “a natural process, nor something that springs automatically from psychological development”. Research has substantiated that students do not find it easy to understand the ways in which history approaches the past. Thus history education as reflected by history teaching should give pupils the intellectual apparatus for handling history (Lee, 1999). It can thus be seen that in order to build historical understanding in their pupils teachers need to go beyond teacher-centred methods and content feeding.

Moreover, teachers must realise that these skills are not generic skills like analysis or critical thinking, but must understand how the particular discipline of history works (Lee, 1999). It is now generally accepted that the more sophisticated your pupils’ understanding of these concepts when related to historical content, the greater will be the depth of their historical understanding.

Another area of debate where history teaching is concerned is whether there is a dichotomy in teaching content and teaching historical skills. Many teachers claim that without content, skills cannot be taught. However, skills and content knowledge in history should not be treated as two separate entities that require discrete treatment and assessment (Le Cocq, 2000). To reach a sophisticated historical understanding, content should be shaped by second-order concepts and historical procedures (Cercadillo, 2001). Teachers need to think through what teaching would be needed to incorporate both content and skills so as to teach their pupils to think through methods and strategies that would move them from low-level historical thinking towards a more sophisticated and enjoyable way of working with historical evidence, rather than content teaching followed by an examination style exercise that passes off as skills teaching.

How can teachers incorporate both content and skills into their lessons to ensure that they are teaching for historical understanding? What kind of planning is needed to ensure that lessons are structured so that historical understanding occurs? Below are some suggestions.

## Planning for Instruction

1. Plan as a unit, not lesson by lesson. In doing so, the teacher will be able to see the big picture and focus pupils' attention on the fact that the lessons that they learn are not isolated events but are tied together either conceptually (for example in the Secondary One History syllabus the concept of civilisation ties the three case studies together) or as explanations to the main event — the unit (see example below on the unit of the Rise of Nazism in Germany). Teachers need to identify a broad enquiry question in a unit and the sub-questions that would focus the pupils learning on a series of enquiries that would in the end answer the broad enquiry question. For example, in the Modern World History syllabus, the unit: Rise of Nazism in Germany may have as its broad enquiry question: Was the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany inevitable? Focusing the unit on this broad enquiry question allows the teacher to bring across several second-order concepts such as significance, empathy and use of evidence. Teachers can then break the unit up into several sub-questions that they want their pupils to investigate.

Your sub-questions may include:

- Was the Treaty of Versailles a major factor in helping the Nazis to power?
  - Did the Great Depression aggravate the situation in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s?
  - Do you agree that the Weimar Republic was doomed from the start?
  - Would you vote for Hitler in 1933?
2. You would also identify the key substantive concepts that you may want to spend some time teaching. For example the concepts of plebiscite, Nazism, depression and others.
  3. You would then identify lessons within the unit where you may want to incorporate several sources for your pupils to investigate a certain aspect of the lesson you are teaching. Ask yourself where in the unit enquiry questions will keep the primary learning focus on skills with sources and evidential work (see "Lesson Ideas" below).
  4. An ambitious teacher who has scaffolded his or her pupils' skill in historical interpretation may want to focus an entire unit on an investigation with sources. For example, for the topic of government in the Lower Secondary syllabus, pupils can be put in the role of historians to find out what makes a good ruler during ancient times. Sources of the various rulers mentioned in the textbook can be used. Pupils then come to their own conclusion as to what qualities are needed to make a good ruler during early times.

What makes an individual enquiry question a good one? According to Riley (2000) you should ask yourself the following questions. Does each of your enquiry question:

- Capture the interest and imagination of your pupils?
- Place an aspect of historical thinking, concept or process at the forefront of the pupils' minds?

- Result in a tangible, lively, substantial, enjoyable “outcome activity” (i.e. at the end of the lesson sequence) through which pupils can genuinely answer the enquiry question?

Questions should not be merely descriptive, e.g. “What was life like for the people of Southeast Asia during the Japanese Occupation?” These do not take pupils into an understanding of the way history works. It says nothing about the status of the information that will render it history.

What this means is that the questions should reflect problems that historians encounter with sources when they try to write their version of history. For example, a question like, “Who can tell us if people’s lives changed during the Japanese Occupation in Southeast Asia?” focuses pupils on the difficulty or need to access reliable information. A question like, “Was the Treaty of Versailles fair?” may lead to morally superficial understanding whereas one like, “Why have some people thought that the Treaty of Versailles was not ‘fair’?” allows the same issue to be addressed in a historical way.

## Structuring an Enquiry

Gorman (1998) encourages teachers to structure their pupils’ enquiry first in order to lead them to independent enquiry. He gave a five-step approach to help teachers structure their pupils’ enquiry.

**Table 1.**  
The “structured enquiry” approach.

Enquiry stage	Purposes
1. To ask significant questions	The starting point of the enquiry is the most important stage. Here we need to do four things: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. engage the pupils’ interest</li> <li>2. Identify the questions to be asked, ideally summed up in one “big” question</li> <li>3. Plan the enquiry</li> <li>4. Describe the outcome and the deadline</li> </ol>
2. To identify and evaluate sources (primary and secondary)	Here pupils decide which sources are useful, which are not and which have to be treated with caution
3. To collect and record information	Here pupils make notes from their sources in readiness for the next two stages
4. To reach conclusions	Through reflection and discussion, pupils should now be able to decide what their answer to the enquiry question is
5. To communicate knowledge and understanding	Here the pupils show their own extended knowledge and understanding in any one of a number of ways

This is not a rigid template: good learning takes place when layers of understanding are built up by pupils through the teacher’s careful planning and sequencing of successive learning objectives.

## Lesson Ideas

Below are two suggested lesson ideas that incorporate both content and skills teaching and help build on pupils' historical understanding.

**Table 2.**

Using sources to engender empathy and historical interpretation for part of a lesson.

**Topic:** Significance of Treaty of Versailles

**Level:** Sec 3 Elective or Sec 4

**Class ability:** Average

**Time frame:** One period

**Specific instructional objective:**

At the end of the lesson, pupils will be able to:

- explain the feelings of and empathise with the British, French and Germans with regard to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles
- explain the impact of the Treaty of Versailles on the rise of the Nazi to power in 1933

**Materials**

Several sources each of British, French and German reactions to the Treaty of Versailles.<sup>2</sup>

Some possible references:

<http://library.kent.ac.uk/cartoons/>

Brooman, J. (1985). *Weimar Germany: Germany 1918–1933*. Harlow: Longman.

Shephard, C., Shephard, K. & Fiehn, T. (Eds.) (2001). *Re-discovering the Twentieth Century World: A World Study After 1900*. [Pupils' book]. London: John Murray. Walsh, B. (2002). *GCSE Modern World History*. Pupil's resource book. 2nd edn. London: John Murray.

**Prerequisite**

Pupils have studied the Treaty of Versailles. As homework they have been given several sources each of British, French and German reactions to the Treaty of Versailles and told to interpret the sources in the light of the Terms of the Treaty from the point of view of the British, French and Germans.

**Suggested Instructional Activities**

**Introduction (5 min)**

1. Do a numbered heads together to recap on the Terms of the Treaty of Versailles

**Development (25 min)**

2. Pupils will be asked to get into groups and fill in the various French, British and German reactions to the Treaty of Versailles in a graphic organiser. They will then present their findings to the class
3. Teacher will continue with the lesson explaining how these reactions would be significant in the rise of the Nazi Party

**Conclusion (10 min)**

4. Pupils will then use their completed graphic organiser to write a summary and conclusion about the impact of the Treaty of Versailles on the rise of the Nazi party

<sup>2</sup>Please note that sources must be varied and cover different points of view as well as represent the major players of that time.

**Table 3.**  
Using sources to do a structured enquiry on an entire lesson.<sup>3</sup>

**Topic:** Hitler's personality and the rise of the Nazi Party

**Level:** Sec 3 Elective or Sec 4

**Class ability:** Average

**Time frame:** Two periods

**Specific instructional objectives:**

At the end of the lesson, pupils will be able to:

- explain how Hitler's personality played a role in his rise to power
- explain how the organisation and policies of the Nazi party led to Hitler's rise to power
- explain the conditions in Germany during that period that helped Hitler rise to power
- explain how Hitler's rise to power brought Europe closer to the brink of war

**Prior or prerequisite knowledge or skills:**

Pupils have already covered the sub-topics within the unit Road to War: Treaty of Versailles, Great Depression, Weimar Republic and the teacher has already explained the significance of all these events to the Road to War.

**Materials**

Sources that bring across Hitler's personality or charisma, conditions in Germany, the Nazi Party and its organisation.<sup>4</sup>

Some possible references:

<http://library.kent.ac.uk/cartoons/>

<http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/>

Brooman, J. (1985). *Weimar Germany: Germany 1918–1933*. Harlow: Longman.

Brooman, J. (1985). *Hitler's Germany: Germany 1933–1933*. Harlow: Longman.

White, A. & Hadley, E. (1991). *Germany 1919–1949*. London: Collins Educational.

**Suggested Instructional Activities**

**Introduction (5 min)**

1. Teacher shows class the Graphic Overview of the entire unit and recaps on the three other sub-topics they have done to explain Nazi rise to power. Tell them that in this lesson they will be looking at the rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party and how this led Europe closer to war.

**Development**

2. Teacher asks how many pupils watch American and/or Singapore Idol. Tell them that today they will be looking at Hitler and the Nazi Party and doing an enquiry on: Would Hitler and the Nazi Party win the "German Idol"??? Pupils will be divided up into groups of four. Each group will be responsible for a set of sources on:
  - Hitler's personality or charisma
  - Conditions in Germany
  - Nazi Party and its organisation.

<sup>3</sup>This enquiry structured lesson is an adaptation of the idea of one group of teachers who planned the lesson as part of their hands-on assignment for an in-service course on "Using Sources in the Teaching of History for Upper Secondary Teachers" conducted by the author.

<sup>4</sup>Please note that sources must be varied and cover different points of view as well as represent the major players of that time.

**Table 3.**  
(Continued)

Teacher will provide the pupils with a set of questions that would accompany the sources to help scaffold pupils enquiry.

Class will come together again to share their findings based on the sources. Pupils will be given a set of criteria for voting the German Idol.

Criteria for judging

- Hitler's charisma
- Nazi propaganda
- Nazi values
- Fear factor

**(40 min)**

3. Teacher focuses pupils' attention back to the front and asks groups whether they would vote Hitler in as the German Idol and justify their answer with support from the sources. A graphic organiser would summarise all the key points brought out by the pupils.

**(10 min)**

4. Prepare pupils to do a short write-up on the reasons for the rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party based on the structured enquiry that they have just completed as homework. The graphic organiser that they had just completed would act as the scaffold for this writing activity.

**Conclusion (5 min)**

5. Teacher will then show pupils the graphic overview of the whole unit once again and reiterate the importance of the Treaty of Versailles, Great Depression, weakness of Weimar Government and Hitler's rise to power in Germany to Europe's path to war.

## Conclusion

Husbands (1996) concludes that our "knowledge and understanding of the past will always be partial and incomplete" because of:

- the passing of time
- the way people behave in the past
- evidence lost over time
- facets of life which were not recorded.

However, when teachers teach history in the traditional way, they contradict what the discipline of history is about and give their pupils the impression that history is a body of facts that one does not question. History, however, is a complex discipline and offers a storehouse of complex and rich problems, not unlike those that confront us daily in the world. Examining these problems requires an

interpretive acumen that extends beyond the “locate information in the text” skills that dominate many school tasks.

If we continue to teach history as if it was a body of facts that is known and conclusive then we will be doing the discipline and our pupils an injustice. Lee (2002) contends that in order for pupils to think about their own learning, factual knowledge must be ordered around the key concepts of the discipline. Pupils monitor their own learning in history when they know what questions to ask of the sources, why caution is required in understanding people in the past and what to look for when evaluating an historical account, in short, doing history. Doing history equip our pupils with the tools necessary to be able to handle contending pieces of information that confront them daily. It also helps develop them to become more informed citizens as the discipline of history helps develop in them a healthy scepticism that allows them to work with the vast amount of information that they would be faced with in their daily lives.

*Doreen Tan has been in the education service since 1979. She is currently a lecturer in the Humanities and Social Studies Education Academic Group of the National Institute of Education. Before joining NIE, she has taught at Primary, Secondary and Junior College levels in the subjects of History, English Language and General Paper. She was also a Specialist Inspector for History and Social Studies from June 1991 to December 1994 in the then Curriculum Planning Division, MOE.*

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