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Developing Historical Habits of Mind through Inquiry

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Introduction

Teaching history is not simply about getting students to learn "the right stories" or getting them to absorb transmitted knowledge about the past; it requires teachers to find means to develop students' historical understanding and to help these students make sense of the knowledge imparted through daily classroom instruction. As many of us already recognize, the knowledge we have about the past is never "given" or "just there" for the taking; the manner in which we come to know what we know about the past requires questioning, imagining, contextualising and (re-)constructing. History education researchers across many national contexts would agree that students need to be taught to understand the nature of historical knowledge – how such knowledge is constructed, how evidence is used to develop interpretations or support claims, how evidence/interpretation is adjudged as valid or credible, etc. – if they are to develop proper understandings about history. Acquiring proficiency in some of these processes calls for a mode of thinking (and an instructional approach) that can enable students to become confident and critical thinkers when studying history. This would involve cultivating certain historical habits of mind that work to develop students' disciplinary ideas/understandings and help them become more adept at historical analysis. An instructional approach that uses historical inquiry as a pedagogical framework is more likely to provide opportunities for students to develop disciplinary ideas, and offers teachers with potential strategies and scaffolds to help deepen students' understandings in more exciting ways. This article explores some ways teachers can make "the complex past" more accessible to students by helping them manage historical problems in the classroom while engaging them in disciplined inquiry about the past. It focuses on the use of inquiry as a means to develop good historical habits of mind, and demonstrates this idea by considering the ways students' ideas (about *significance*, *diversity*, *causation* and *accounts*) can be developed through historical inquiry.

Inquiry as an approach to developing historical habits of mind

"Inquiry" may be understood as the *process* of investigation that is aimed at giving students the independence to reconstruct the overarching concepts and nuances of any discipline (Nussbaum, 1997; Parker & Hess, 2001; Parker, 2015). Undergirding this process is the purposeful act of seeking information or knowledge, investigating significant questions, and constructing meaning or knowledge "within a community that establishes the goals, standards, and procedures of study" (Levstik & Barton, 2001, p. 13). As a "mode of qualitative inquiry", history "shares a concern for context, for undertaking research in natural settings, for the wholeness or integrity of experience, and for interpreting and

explaining the significance of experience" (Edson, 1988, p. 45). Historical inquiry, then, may be seen as a systematic process by which we can come to know something about the past – through developing an understanding of a broad picture of the past or by offering explanations as to why events happened in the past – at times through the unlearning and relearning of what we already know. For the most part, acquiring knowledge about the past, and not the knowledge itself, is the learning of history. Beyond content aggregation and skills acquisition, learning history in school involves understanding the means to engage students in the process of historical inquiry.

Recent efforts to address apparent shortcomings in the teaching and learning of history in Singapore schools marked a conscious attempt on the part of the Ministry of Education (MOE) to align local historical instruction to an approach that is *inquiry-based*, and one that focuses on the development of students' understanding about the historical discipline (MOE, 2012). As the recommended pedagogy at the lower and upper secondary as well as the (post-secondary) JC/CI levels, historical inquiry is seen as the preferred instructional approach to purposefully transform the way history has been conventionally taught in schools. Nested within this approach is the emphasis placed on the development of students' conceptual understandings, particularly on how an understanding of second-order (disciplinary) concepts like accounts, evidence, causation, empathy, diversity and significance are central in the construction of historical knowledge. Through historical instruction that is discipline-focused and inquiry-driven, syllabus developers are hopeful that history teachers will be able to help develop students' understandings of historical concepts and equip them with the means to understand and critically evaluate the nature of historical knowledge. Clearly, the acquisition of proper historical knowledge must provide students with more powerful understandings about the discipline than what has been prescribed to them through textbooks, which have often served as the "arbiters of historical questions" and frequently perceived as the "purveyors of absolute truth" (Wineburg, 1991; 2001).

Reverence accorded to the textbook and specifically the word sources within the textbook is, arguably, the result of many years of teacher-directed instruction and, arose out of assessment imperatives (that primarily value the ability to put words on paper) and the outcome of teachers trying to meet other educational and social demands of/for assessment. Often, many of our students attach sentimental value to music, poetry and paintings rather than historical value, lending them to see the textbook as "the exemplar and repository of historical knowledge" instead, and not another expression of the author's intention (Gabella, 1994, p. 346). For example, when asked about the extent to which propaganda was effective under Stalin's and Hitler's rule, many students were predisposed to quote directly from the word source, instead of providing their inference from the propaganda posters and pictures of mass rallies, all of which had actually been discussed during classroom instruction. The same can be said when teaching a topic in the lower secondary history syllabus: when asked to give evidence of Singapore's relations with the world, instead of citing the pictures of artefacts found along the Singapore River, most students were more inclined to provide evidence from word sources instead. It may be possible to argue that many of our students are more likely to

hold texts/words in the textbook with higher regard, compared to the posters and pictures presented in the same prescribed text.

However, the introduction of source-based case studies (since 2001) and the use of the inquiry framework (since 2013) have led to a gradual shift in history education towards one that preferred sound reasoning and analytical skills over mere content accumulation, and one that places greater focus on processes over the amount of information students can retain in their head. Students are now required to tap into an array of possibilities when dealing with related issues on "how we come to know" and are engaged in the act of "doing history" – where they "pose questions, collect and analyse sources, struggle with issues of significance, and ultimately build their own historical interpretations" (Levstik, 1996, p. 394). Increasingly, students have begun to understand for themselves the nature of the discipline and seemed ready to question *all* pictures, movies, songs, and even historians' written perspectives, of a historical event. Engaging in historical inquiry supports the move to source-based learning and more importantly, it nurtures disciplinary thinking that encourages the development of habits of mind that is significant in cultivating 21st century competencies within our students.

In transforming the way students in Singapore approach historical study and cultivating (in them) good historical habits of mind, history teachers may need to provide as many opportunities as possible for students to engage in historical inquiry. As Stearns (1998) maintained, "The key to developing historical habits of mind...is having repeated experience in historical inquiry. Such experience should involve a variety of materials and a diversity of analytical problems...What matters is learning how to access different magnitudes of historical change, different examples of conflicting interpretations, and multiple kinds of evidence" (n.p.). To develop historical habits of mind, lessons must allow students to *inquire* and to allow their perspectives to be shaped by evidence and sound reasoning. While it can be said that students already naturally partake in inquiry having started from a young age with the "incessant *why* questions", teachers do not need "to teach inquiry so much as they need to help children become *more skilful* inquirers" (Parker, 2012, p. 2). Additionally, an important consideration in such historical inquiries must be the inclusion of a variety of cognitive tasks, challenges or problems that would allow students the opportunity to come to grips with the nature of the discipline, and gain useful experience in becoming skilled historical thinkers. These may involve getting students to engage with multiple perspectives in history, providing opportunities for them to grapple with competing claims or contradictory interpretations of past events, developing their ability to critically examine available sources as evidence of a historical past, having them ask important historical questions – about events, context, and agency, and so on.

Ways to develop disciplinary ideas through historical inquiry

Good historical inquiries have the potential to lead students to question, imagine, contextualise, analyse and (re-)construct the past through investigation and meaning-making exercises. The inquiry process purposefully takes the student through the various stages of developing sound historical arguments. It begins by sparking students' curiosity of the topic, followed by encouragement to question the hypothesis, before getting students to embark on gathering relevant

data. Students will then critically analyse the research collected before communicating their findings with the intention of future refinement of their arguments.

Below is an example of how students' ideas can be improved with thoughtful historical instruction through the process of inquiry. Using Gorman's (1998) stages of inquiry, the lesson idea on the topic of "migration" below was crafted for a Secondary 1 History class but the same methodology can be used for other levels or topics as well.

What were the push and pull factors for migration to Singapore in the early 20th century?	
Stage 1: Ask significant questions	The teacher begins the curriculum topic by sparking students' curiosity of the topic and engaging the class in a word splash activity using the term "migration". The teacher records students' responses on the board. Students elaborate on the words to arrive at some plausible reasons behind migration. Guiding questions such as "Why do people migrate?" and "What would make you decide to migrate?" or "Why won't you migrate?" may be given to students. During students' discussion, the teacher divides the whiteboard into two halves; one half representing "Push" factors and the other "Pull" factors. After the discussion period, the teacher elicits responses from students. As students offer their responses, the teacher records their ideas in the respective groups, without defining what "push"/"pull" factors are (as yet). When all responses are given, the teacher gets students to determine what they understand by "push"/"pull" factors.
Stage 2: Identify and evaluate sources of information	In Stage 2, the teacher provides students with pictures, extracts of letters and accounts of various migrants depicting various political, social and economic factors influencing their decisions to migrate. Each group receives the same set of sources but will also be required to analyse a different source from the other groups. The teacher provides the respective groups with a separate piece of paper of the specific source that each group will analyse. Students study the source and write their response to the question, "*What can you infer from the source about the reasons why people migrated to Singapore in the early 20th century*?" The groups will then attach their analysis on the walls of the classroom, and the entire class will engage in a gallery walk activity to gain a variety of perspectives.
Stage 3: Collect and record information	After the gallery walk, students record the other groups' analysis on the graphic organiser. Students will then engage in a whole-class discussion, presenting on a source that they were not originally tasked to analyse. In addition, students will be asked to gather further evidence on their own to support their claim on the reasons for migration to Singapore in the early 20th century. This process can be done in class or as a take-home assignment.
Stage 4: Reach	With the sources that are available to students from both the teacher and their own research, students craft their own conclusions on the "push" and "pull"

conclusions	factors behind migration to Singapore in the early 20th century. This would be done as an individual reflection.
Stage 5: Communicate knowledge and understanding	From their individual reflection, each student will share their conclusions with their group members. Each group will reach a consensus and present a concerted response to the main inquiry question. In addition, each group is required to reflect on the extent to which the reasons for migration a century ago is similar to present-day reasons for migration. This closes the loop to the task given at Stage 1.

As an alternative to teacher-directed instruction, the simple example above demonstrates how students are given the opportunity to determine for themselves the meaning of certain concepts, and to appreciate the relevance of various source-types in providing different perspectives to an issue/event. Repeated experience in such an inquiry (across different topics) offers the potential to nurture students to become independent thinkers, to allow them to identify and explore patterns (for example, in migration and settlement in colonial Singapore), and in so doing help them to build connections across events, time and place in history.

In developing students' disciplinary thinking in history, researchers, educators and many involved in education often spoke about the importance of aligning students' learning of history to reflect the practises of historians. Weaved into the topical chapters of the prescribed history textbook are sections titled 'Think like a Historian', where students are invited to get acquainted with historical ways of thinking or knowing (in the form of important second order concepts that structure the historical discipline). Due to exigency of time and other curricular/instructional challenges teachers face in school, these sections, however, are often overlooked. Nonetheless, if teachers believe that the learning of school history calls for developing a deeper appreciation for the subject and a way of thinking that systematically employs "processes of critical historical inquiry to reconstruct and reinterpret the past", then the teaching historical concepts through inquiry-based learning is both instructive and necessary (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994, p. 40). Having students exposed to concepts allow them to see that history is not just about the *acquisition* of knowledge, but nurtures their thought process for them to critically *search* for knowledge.

The following lesson ideas exemplify, in brief, possible ways of approaching the teaching of historical concepts through inquiry-based structures. Anchoring each inquiry is a selected historical concept that the lesson aims to implicitly highlight and demonstrate.

Significance

Historical significance is one of the most important concepts in historical study (see Seixas & Morton, 2012). After all, the design of the school's curriculum and the historical events that go into the prescribed text is shaped by what historians and educators deem to be significant for students. Managing historical significance requires that we ask questions like: "What makes a story more significant than another? Is this simply a matter of perspective?" or "How do we make choices about what is worth remembering? What purposes drive our choices?" or even "Why is this event so significant? Does it shed new light? Does it deepen our current

understandings? What does it tell us about who/what/where we are today?" Among other things, understanding the significance of events in history involves being able to recognize that historians *ascribe* "significance" to events, people and developments, based on how these shed light or reveal important understandings on emerging issues in history. Such an understanding also requires students to contextualize and connect historical events, developments and people to specific circumstances in time and place, and to evaluate their significance in terms of their impact or consequences over a period of time (or how these may change or shift over time).

Secondary 1 – Chapter 3 (Significance): Which was the most significant <u>global</u> event (Industrial Revolution/Abolition of Slave Trade/Opening of Suez Canal) that influenced mass migration to Singapore?	
Stage 1: Ask significant questions	(Prior to this lesson, students should already have an idea of how the 'Industrial Revolution', the 'Abolition of the Slave Trade' and the 'Opening of the Suez Canal' contributed to mass migration in the 19th century) The teacher begins by asking students to think about one of the most important things/events/people that have shaped their lives. Students will share their thoughts, explain their respective responses and clarify with their peers why their particular response is significant to them. Based on the responses that students give, the teacher will provide some guiding criteria to what can be considered significant. These criteria may include "short-term impact", "long-term impact", "catalyst" or others that the teacher considers useful/relevant.
Stage 2: Identify and evaluate source of information	The teacher then divides the class into 3 groups, with each group assigned to study 'The Industrial Revolution', 'The Abolition of the Slave Trade' and 'The Opening of the Suez Canal' respectively. The inquiry question given to each group is, "Why was the Industrial Revolution/Abolition of Slave Trade/Opening of Suez Canal a significant reason for mass migration in the 19th century?" The teacher provides each group with source materials such as maps, historian's accounts and pictorial records for each event. Students will use these sources and the earlier criteria to inform their response. The teacher divides the whiteboard into three columns and have representatives from each group to write and present their responses in the respective columns.
Stage 3: Collect and record information	Each group will then be encouraged to think further about the issue/event, making an argument for how each global event influenced mass migration to Singapore. The teacher would realise that the British greatly contributed to each event and, subsequently, direct students to Chapter 2 of the textbook, which covers British interests in Asia and Southeast Asia. At this stage, students are given access to the Internet to search for evidence that would substantiate the arguments made.
Stage 4: Reach conclusions	Based on their analysis of the sources, the reading of the earlier chapter and their subsequent online research, students would reach their own conclusion as to how each event was significant in influencing mass migration to

	Singapore.
Stage 5: Communicate knowledge and understanding	Each group will then participate in a class debate and make a case for why their reason is the most significant global event that influenced mass migration to Singapore. It is important for teachers to also note that a balanced conclusion is acceptable as students should also understand that many times in history, it is the accumulation of events that make a phenomena possible.

Diversity

The historical concepts of "diversity" and "accounts" are usually conflated. The subtle difference is that while the former focuses on the experiences and perspectives of the main players (or groups of people) involved in the historical event, the latter essentially refers to the various historians' interpretations of the event. As a disciplinary concept, historical diversity helps students to recognize and acknowledge the differing (and oftentimes, contrasting) experiences of people who lived the event, and contributes to the realization that the complex past can be better understood by taking into consideration different perspectives, diverse experiences and multiple interpretations. As perspectives or interpretations of events are best understood by considering context and circumstances of the time, historical diversity allows people studying history to view the event through the (at times self-referential) lenses of the players so as to formulate a better understanding of their intention or motivation and the context that shaped their experiences.

Secondary 2 – Chapter 6 (Diversity): 'Singapore out of Malaysia!' Was it by choice or no choice?	
Stage 1: Ask significant questions	The teacher starts off by showing the class The Straits Times newspaper article's caption: 'Singapore is Out'. The class engages in a word splash activity that is meant to explore initial ideas/responses based on the caption 'Singapore Out of Malaysia!'
Stage 2: Identify and evaluate source of information	The teacher then divides the class into groups of 4, providing each student with the different perspectives or standpoints taken by major political players in Singapore and Malaysia on separation at that time. Each group is tasked to only focus on the perspectives/standpoints held by players either in Singapore or Malaysia, for e.g. Perspective A (Singapore) and Perspective B (Malaysia). Students will note down the key arguments for each group. The main question included to help focus students' attention when examining each source is, "What can you infer from the source about the reasons for separation?"
Stage 3: Collect and record information	2 members from one group will then join students in the other group that analysed the perspective from a different side (i.e. pairing off students from Perspective 'A' with the pair in Perspective 'B', and vice-versa). They will present to each other their country's perspective on the issue of separation.

	Students are expected to take down what their peers have shared.
Stage 4: Reach conclusions	Students will return to their home groups and share what they have learnt. Together as a group, they will then approach the question of whether Singapore's separation from Malaysia was by choice or whether it was made with little or no choice (on Singapore's part).
Stage 5: Communicate knowledge and understanding	Each group will then present to the class their group's conclusion. The teacher will conclude discussions by focusing on the importance of recognizing notions of diversity (in this case, perspectives) in understanding major historical events and decisions. Diverse perspectives provide a richer and a more layered understanding of decisions made and the implications of that decision on relationships.

Causation

Studying history involves appreciating that the answers to "why" and "how" questions may not be easily disposed of. History is context-specific, and the various aspirations, personalities and situations that shape historical events mean that pinpointing to one specific reason that led to the event can be problematic. Having a good grasp of causality or causation in history includes being able to distinguish between different causes (preconditions vs catalysts; immediate vs underlying causes; short-term vs long-term factors) as well as their outcomes/consequences, and recognising the interplay between actions of historical actors and the conditions that exist at the time. Some outcomes (about historical causation) teachers may want students to acquire include (see Lee, 2005): changes in history are driven by multiple causes and results in multiple consequences; there may be a hierarchy of causes and some causes may be causally irrelevant; causes can have intended and unintended outcomes; causes vary in terms of how they influence an event – some causes can be more important than others; and that other factors (outside the actions of the main historical players) play a part in causing historical events.

Secondary 3 – Unit 2 - Chapter 1 (Causation): Who caused WWI?	
Stage 1: Ask significant questions	(The importance of discussing who caused WWI is important in understanding the extent to which the Treaty of Versailles was a fair treaty.) The teacher starts the lesson by having students read the story about *Alphonse the Camel* and in their groups decide "Was it the straw that broke the camel's back?" This activity would lead to students constructing a list of possible causes that led to Alphonse's demise, and provides opportunities for the teacher to suggest causal attributes (such as different typologies related to "causes" or the non-rigid distinction between "cause" and "consequence" – where a consequence can *also* be the cause of another outcome/consequence). If time permits, the teacher could then engage in a "transfer" to the historical, where the discussion over causation could centre on responding to the question: "Who was responsible for the death of Archduke Franz Ferdinand?" (There are many videos available that can

	contribute to a fruitful discussion.)
Stage 2: Identify and evaluate source of information	(Students should already be familiar with some of the main events that caused WWI.) The teacher will put up a brief write up of the six key events that caused WWI on the board: competition for colonies, naval arms race, alliances, nationalism, the first and second Balkan wars, and the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. In their groups, students are to use arrows to form a connection between each event, with an explanation accompanying each arrow. As a class, they would then reach a consensus as to where the arrows should be positioned and the accompanying explanations for each arrow.
Stage 3: Collect and record information	Each group will take on the role of one country (Britain; France; Germany; Russia; USA; Italy; Japan; Serbia; Austria; Hungary) and explain the respective country's involvement or abstinence in those key events. It is up to the teacher's discretion as to which countries they would like students to focus on. It is important for teachers to note here that how students explain each country's involvement (or the criteria they use to justify/support their stances) can tell us a lot about how they view the events. For the purpose of the activity, mobile laptops will be made available.
Stage 4: Reach conclusions	The teachers will line the front of the class with tables. In a modified "hot-seating" activity, 2 representatives from each group will sit in front of the class to present (reasons for) their country's involvement (or non-involvement) in the respective events. The rest of the students are encouraged to allow all of the representatives to speak first without interrupting. They should, however, note down points of interest/contention on a given recording tool or a graphic organiser. As students present, the teacher will note salient points on the diagram with arrows on the board. After each student presents, the groups will get together to discuss "Who caused WWI?"
Stage 5: Communicate knowledge and understanding	Each group will present their response to the question. Focus should be on coming up with the best possible answer, i.e. one supported by evidence, valid claims and sound argument. The teacher should reinforce that it is perfectly acceptable to arrive at a balanced conclusion and to suggest that all the countries may have been equally responsible for the outbreak of WWI.

Accounts

Much of what we know about historical events is informed by historians' interpretations or accounts of those events. It is important for students to realise that historical accounts of past events are written to answer specific inquiries and reflect the focus and points of view of their authors. Even if the evidence can be read differently, perspectives and points of view are legitimate (and sometimes necessary) when historians construct knowledge about the past. As selective interpretations of events, it is in the nature of accounts to differ from another. Nevertheless, such historical (re-)constructions can be evaluated according to a set of standards or

criteria – like evidence, argument and story parameters. Some outcomes (about historical accounts) teachers may want students to acquire include (see Lee, 1996; Lee & Ashby, 2000; Chapman, 2009): Accounts are (re-)constructions (of the past) in answer to specific questions; accounts are necessarily selective and are constructed for particular themes and timescales; there can be no complete account; contrary accounts of the same topic/ period may be accepted because they address & answer different (but equally worthwhile) questions about the topic/period.

Secondary 4 – Unit 3 - Chapter 6 (Accounts): Who was Primarily Responsible for the Cold War?	
Stage 1: Ask significant questions	The teacher could begin by preparing three different photographs depicting different angles of a car accident. The teacher will start by first showing a close up view of the car accident and ask students to develop an account of what may have happened and who might have been responsible for the accident. This process would be repeated for the other two photographs. The aim of the activity is to suggest to students that different perspectives or vantage points and the questions that emerge out of these perspectives/vantage points may allow for differences in terms of how the accident happened and the adjudicatory outcome (as to who was the responsible party) attached to the event.
Stage 2: Identify and evaluate source of information	The teacher will the divide students into home groups and provide each group with specific sources/readings corresponding to the respective time periods. Each group will represent a different time period: 1940s-1960s (Traditional School), early 1960s-1970s (Revisionist School; and 1970s-1980s and post-1991 (post-Revisionist Schools). In total, there will be 4 home groups. Students are to base their discussion on the sources provided and answer the question: "Who was primarily responsible for the Cold War?"
Stage 3: Collect and record information	After the discussions within the home groups, students will be organised into expert groups to share the main findings from their home group's discussion. This allows students to be exposed to various historian's interpretations of the issue from the different time periods.
Stage 4: Reach conclusions	Students will stay in their expert groups and formulate a conclusion to the inquiry question and some plausible reasons as to why historians studying the event from different time periods might view the issue differently.
Stage 5: Communicate knowledge and understanding	Students return to their home group and share the various expert groups' response to the issues. Each home group will then share with the class the main takeaways from the lesson with the class.

These are just some of the ways that teachers might include the teaching of historical concepts through inquiry-based instructions in their curriculum. Implicit (or perhaps explicitly, too) in this approach is the idea that historical inquiry, as a pedagogical framework, provides opportunities for students to develop disciplinary thinking, even if in a gradual way. It offers students the opportunity to create historical narratives on their own, so that history becomes for them a process of seeking knowledge, and not simply knowledge acquisition. Students, if taught to understand the nature of history will be able to build a framework for making critical sense out of legitimate stories, and rationalise why certain histories offer alternative and competing accounts of the past. As they engage in a study of the past, they are also likely to make contact with concerns of "the present" and will learn to develop nuanced understandings as to how the present interacts with the past. The opportunity to investigate problems, make connections between past and present, and the ability to process information in an intelligent way forms part of a crucial intellectual process only historical inquiry can offer our students.

Conclusion

> … historical inquiry may aid us, as educators and individuals, to restore a form of 'moral discourse' that can sustain and nurture both our private and professional lives. Studying history and participating in history are inseparable. (Edson, 1988, p. 54)

The beauty in an authentic history education lies in its process of allowing the individual to live through the various stories from the perspective of another. And in this process, the individual finds themselves in dialogue with the aspirations and struggles that shape their participation in making their own history. If our aim as history educators is to allow our students "to step beyond the looking glass and into the conversation of inquiry, then history educators must also grapple with the shifting assumptions about knowledge and representation that drive the field" (Gabella, 1994, p. 359). As a pedagogical tool, inquiry can offer opportunities to help students build understandings about concepts that are integral in the construction of historical knowledge. 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 their disciplinary ideas in history, and provides teachers with interventionist strategies or scaffolds to help manage students' ideas is more likely to develop deeper historical understandings among its learners. This article highlights the importance of engaging historical inquiry in the teaching and learning of history, to nurture disciplined thinking in our students so as to cultivate a more sophisticated understanding of the subject. It suggests some practical approaches that teachers and students can be involved in, and how the teaching of historical concepts can be weaved into the curriculum to allow students to find and create their own meaning of the content. It is with the hope that by engaging our students in historical inquiry that they realise that history is not made up of disparate information of the past, but to appreciate and find the connections between the fragments that make the present more meaningful.

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