Classroom Conversation: The Use of Discussion-Based Strategy in the History Classroom

Jane Choong

Tanglin Secondary School (Singapore) &

National Institute of Education (Singapore)

Introduction

In *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts,* Sam Wineburg argued that historical thinking "in its deepest forms, is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development" (2001: 7). He proposed that in order to understand and grapple with the past, we must change our existing mental structures. In reality, however, Singapore teachers often find themselves "telling history" to their students, as if particular stories about the past can be told in a linear manner or told through a given narrative. The idea that students would need to learn how to mentally wrestle with unfamiliar content, and to also become competent at requisite examination skills that demonstrate proficiency in managing the specified content, may perhaps seem an unfeasible expectation. But, as Wineburg maintained, historical thinking is "an unnatural act" – it requires students to think about the past in a way that goes against how they ordinarily think. Such an approach involves getting students to think about the past in a methodical way and enabling them to make sense of the past using disciplinary lenses. The inability to take on this approach in the history classroom may lead teachers to resort to the very familiar strategy which is to "tell history", or what I would call "shouting history" at students.

As a history educator, "shouting history" may seem like a terrible notion but it has become a necessary method in our bag of tools. When we teach history to some of our weaker learners, we may find ourselves spending a lot of time getting these students to repeatedly recall materials already covered in previous lessons. When faced with such challenges, it may be easy for us to make certain assumptions about these students: that they are struggling with the subject because they do not read history sufficiently, or that the content is too much for them to digest in a short time, or that they lacked the language skills to comprehend historical sources. These difficulties are indeed real issues that confound students and impede their ability to learn history well. Yet, there are students who also may be "too lazy to think" as they prefer to simply wait for the teacher to give them the "correct answer". The fact that they are working with the notion of "correct answers" not only points to certain flawed assumptions these students may hold about history, but also their understanding about the nature of historical study. So, why is learning history challenging for students? Is it challenging because it involves the learning of an overwhelming amount of factual details, or is it challenging because it is difficult to interpret sources in their specific historical contexts? I strongly believe it is the latter.

In this article, I am going to make two assumptions: first, that learning history is challenging because the past is not easy for students to picture or imagine; and second, that engaging in historical thinking is challenging for students because of the "unnatural" way students are expected to view the past. As history educators, we need to make this "unnatural act" more intuitive and instinctive so that we can develop students who are discerning in judgement and are able to think independently and critically about the world around them.

Discussion strategy as challenging but necessary

Tony Wagner (2014), founder of the Change Leadership Group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, said in his book *The Global Achievement Gap* that in the world today, people "have to be able to take in all sorts of new information, new situations, and be able to operate in ambiguous and unpredictable ways." To do well in the future, the ability to read, analyze and synthesize information becomes very important. Wagner questioned if the American school system is preparing students for such a future. Similarly, in *Five Minds for the Future*, Howard Gardner (2007) talked about the importance of having five different "minds" to deal with both the expected and the unexpected. He defined the synthesizing "mind" as one that takes information from separate sources, understands and evaluates that information objectively, and puts it together in ways that makes sense to everyone. Both Wagner and Gardner stressed that the ability to read, analyze and synthesize information is critical for the future world and students in school must be given opportunities to develop and hone these skills.

Discussion and critical conversation in the classroom can help students to rethink assumptions, and to subject their assumptions to continuous rounds of questioning, argument and counter-argument. Typically, the skills that are developed through such processes should be in line with what Wagner and Gardner stressed, that is, the ability to read, analyze and synthesize information into a new idea that can then be communicated. Students will first be asked to make their own assumptions about what they have read, to objectively analyze the information, and then be made to take a stance. Thereafter, they will be expected to communicate their points of view to their classmates, and to review their thinking should their classmates provide an effective counter-argument. These sets of skills are likely to turn students into better history learners as they would have to use information from various sources to create knowledge about the past events. In the process, they will make decisions about the reliability of sources in relation to each other, and develop understandings as to how and why interpretations of history may change with/over time. Discussions in the classroom should facilitate the process of analysis and synthesis, and students must be given adequate time develop and talk about interpretations, and make sense of the evidence.

While the use of discussion as a strategy is an effective means to facilitate student learning, it is often difficult to practice in the classroom. First, classroom management is a reality that teachers grapple with on a daily basis, and a potential challenge that must first be addressed when deciding to use discussion-based pedagogies in the classroom. Second, to ensure that the strategy will meet the targeted learning outcomes, appropriate time and space must be given so that students can come to their own realizations about the materials they

are given. The realization often takes place after students have interpreted the source materials and are guided to make logical conclusions based on the available evidence. Finally, even as teachers take on the role of facilitators, they also will need to develop their competencies, such as the ability to design a discussion-based methodology within an inquiry framework, to develop facilitation skills to support or guide discussions, and to develop competence to summarize the discussion so that learning can take place. For discussion to be successful, teachers will need to plan an inquiry question that is pitched at the students' level, provide scaffolds and guidance for students to prepare for the discussion, and constantly remind students about the process of discussion, such as listening to their peers and considering alternative viewpoints. All these will require a mindset change in terms of history teachers' understanding of what the classroom should look like, and how lessons should be conducted in order for discussion-based pedagogies to take place.

Scaffolds for discussion

One of the advantages in using a discussion-based strategy is the flexibility the teacher potentially has, for example, in deciding the number of scaffolds to be given to the students, or in setting the level at which the inquiry question may be pitched. Students may also find it interesting and engaging to explore sources and develop alternative narratives by questioning different evidence. This strategy will also allow peer learning and collaboration which will further develop communication skills in students. However, there are also real challenges.

Teachers may question whether effective learning is taking place through discussion as they may not be confident

that students have sufficient content knowledge to support their arguments. Also, there may be concerns that students' discussions may not be adequately deep nor sufficiently broad. Some students may end up stubbornly sticking to their viewpoints, or splitting hairs over minor issues and missing the arguments altogether. More importantly, students may feel that while they had fun and are engaged during discussions, they may not be able to apply the head knowledge learnt through discussion into their own learning. Some may also view their peers as non-subject experts and thus would not trust their viewpoints. In the end, if students are not cognizant about the process of classroom discussions, they will not be able to appreciate the benefits or the value of having engaged discussions in the classrooms.

Yet, while these challenges are classroom realities, they should not hinder teachers from using the strategy. Some of these initial teething issues can be resolved by preparing the class well before the discussion takes place. For example, scribes can be allocated to each group so that the discussions are captured. This can be used later on as class discussions points and as summary to conclude the lesson. Also, to help students master content areas, information packages or reading materials can be given prior to the lesson. In addition, the teacher can also prepare the class by setting ground rules for discussion so that students are more aware of how to collaborate and how to communicate their ideas better. It is expected that both the teacher and students will encounter some initial difficulty. Nevertheless, the benefits to learning outweigh the initial challenges.

According to Brookfield and Preskill (2012), the benefit of discussion is that it exposes students to different and new points of view, and will subsequently

increase students' understanding and renew their motivation to continue to learn. Through this process, students will gain collective wisdom which they may not be able to achieve on their own. In *Visible Learning for Teachers,* Hattie (2012) encouraged teachers to pay attention to how students learn, instead of solely focusing on what they are learning. Hence, students must be given space and time to think about what they know, to listen to the various viewpoints presented by the teacher and their peers, to evaluate the information that they have received and to synthesize it with their own knowledge.

As teachers, we play the role of a facilitator to guide our students and provide support when they need it. In one of my first few attempts at using discussions as a teaching strategy, I felt the need to explain, in great detail, the circumstances surrounding Hitler's rise to power, before explaining the inquiry question, the learning intentions and the success criteria for their task. After my lengthy explanation, I set my students to work on their preparation for discussion. When I collected their work, I realized that I had provided too much scaffolding and my students had not been given the opportunity to explore the given sources on their own. Their preparation work ended up echoing points that I raised during the lesson. I learnt that I have to give my students more space and opportunity to learn on their own. As teachers, we should help level up students' ability based on where they are at and not where we want them to go immediately.

When embarking on the use of discussion-based strategy for the first time, the agreement on ground rules is important because it can help keep discussions positive, open and relevant. The ground rules should encourage students to take responsibility for the discussion, be respectful of different perspectives and to also understand that discussions are not about winning arguments. Discussions can bring together collective wisdom which allows for issues to be discussed more broadly and deeply. Ground rules help students to work in teams and develop a more democratic disposition. They dictate areas like respecting each other's viewpoints, taking turns, and how students craft their arguments and counter arguments These rules, however, will change with the nature of the class. If students are too aggressive in defending their arguments, then the ground rules will need to establish the tone and words used in the discussion. The objective is for students to come out of the discussion wiser than before, and not to create tensions between classmates.

One strategy to help students engage in constructive discussions is the use of sentence stems. In one of my history classes, I introduced the use of sentence stems to help my students communicate their ideas or questions to the rest of their group members. The class was to discuss if Stalin was a great leader. In one particular group, a student gave a very convincing argument as to why Stalin was a visionary and was too advanced for his time. While this student was able to convince his group members that Stalin was a great leader because he was forward-looking and had a great vision for Russia's future, his argument disregarded how Stalin's actions had devastating effects on the Russian society. One of his group members asked, "I've got a question about Stalin and how he purged people who objected to his idea. Would that still make him a good leader because he was not open to suggestions? He only wanted to do it his way." Here, the sentence stem "*I want to raise a question…*" helped to move their discussion forward or to switch direction when necessary. Sentence stems

can be a range of questions or beginning statements to scaffold students to help further their discussion. It allowed students to consider another perspective so that their learning can deepen.

As mentioned, discussions can be a powerful and effective tool to enhance learning in the classroom if planned well. The class grouping structure, for example, based on academic strength, ability levels, or differing points of view, can enhance learning as students can gain deeper insights and acquire diverse perspectives as they learn from each other. Students' personality should also be part of the consideration to ensure that the group is able to build consensus successfully at the end of the discussion. Some amount of intentional pairing will need to be done to ensure that there is a good mix of thinkers and speakers in each group. This will allow some dissonance to be created among the group members, which can lead to greater learning.

Teacher facilitation is important in the discussion-based classroom. In one of my (mixed-ability) Secondary 4 history class, students discussed responsibility for the Korean War in 1950 using Compass Point as a discussion structure. Compass Point is a routine that can be used to help students make decisions pertaining to a specific issue. The class was divided into four groups with each group representing one country and their leader: North Korea and Kim Il Sung; South Korea and Syngman Rhee; the USSR and Stalin; the USA and Truman. At the end of the discussion, the group was to establish a defense of the country and leader they represented, and demonstrated why they should not be held responsible for the Korean War. Students were asked to engage in prior reading about their respective country/perspective and also to learn about the views of the other countries in order to defend the

perspectives they were representing. When students came back for their discussion, I found that all groups knew the country and the leader that they were representing very well. They could pinpoint the causal factors that led to the person's actions or events that happened. However, when it was time for each group to defend their leaders and why they should not be held responsible for the war, students were inadequately prepared as they lacked understanding of what other groups were doing. At this point, all groups were stuck and I had to intervene. I asked each group to prepare a two-minute summary of the country/leader they were representing, and to present it to the class. Groups that were not presenting had to listen and pen down questions or pointers that would help support their argument. At the end of the presentation, students realized that the tension that had led to the Korean War was partially due to different national agendas and the Cold War tension that existed between the USA and the USSR.

In this lesson, teacher intervention was necessary to give further scaffolding that allowed students to reach a consensus. The role of the teacher in this case was to identify the knowledge gap and to help students bridge the gap so that they were able to benefit from the collective knowledge that the class had developed to gain deeper insight. It also helped build students' confidence level and students were able to articulate their point of view and construct an argument successfully. This process promoted critical thinking because the new information provided by other groups created dissonance that students needed to reconcile in line with their existing knowledge. When students are able to reconcile disparate information to arrive at a new conclusion, they may be said to have successfully synthesized conflicting information into a kind of new knowledge that they have made their own.

At the end of the Korean War discussion, students left the class excited and curious. The question on my mind was whether my students had developed critical thinking skills and understood the role of historical facts in developing historical arguments. Were students able to understand the broader causal factors that led to the outbreak of the Korean War or were they merely concerned with the perspective they represented in the class discussion? Were students aware of the motivations of each of the leaders they represented? Did my lesson help students perform the "unnatural act" in historical thinking as defined by Wineburg? I decided to use formative assessment to check their understanding. In the following lesson, I asked students to respond to another inquiry question: *Was the Korean War a civil war or a proxy war*? I was pleasantly surprised to find that most students were able to explain the different perspectives, according to the roles each country played in causing the Korean War. Most of them came to the conclusion that the Korean War was both a civil and a proxy war because all the countries involved had their own motivation, and that to determine if the war was a civil or proxy war will depend on which perspective we take. Their conclusion answered all the questions and concerns that I had on my mind. Students did learn history and could apply their knowledge to a broader context. They could toggle between the global perspectives and individual country's perspectives, and were also aware of the motivations behind each political leader. I felt that the students had been able to view the event in historical terms and to evaluate causal factors based on perspective and context.

Implication for pedagogy and classroom teaching

My experience in using discussion in the history classroom can be summarized as follows: first, any inquiry question can be as thought provoking as the students that are engaged in it; second, it is important to demonstrate dispositions for communication and discussion; and third, students must be given time to think.

Thought-provoking inquiry question

The design of the inquiry must be interesting enough to ignite students' curiosity, yet the content must also be challenging enough for students to want to take on the inquiry. As shown in Table 1, considerations such as grouping structures and reading materials will affect students' learning motivation. For example, students with higher ability may take on roles such as the USA and the USSR in the Korean War that would require them to understand the broader context of the Cold War. The motivations behind the two superpowers and the concept of the balance of power may be challenging to some students. Students with lower ability may take on roles representing North and South Korea, where the roles are nationalistic in nature and ones where students may be able to comprehend in a reasonable way. The disadvantage of this combination would be that students with similar abilities may have similar viewpoints and perspectives. Thus, when closing the lesson with a class discussion, the teacher must explicitly invite all groups to share their viewpoints and reconcile, as a class, the different perspectives. The jigsaw strategy can also be deployed to build consensus in students' home groups before building consensus as a class. This will allow more engagement as every student would have a say either at the home group level or the class level.

Table 1: Considerations when designing the inquiry

Difficulty level of the Inquiry question	Grouping structures	Sources and reading materials	Rationale for the grouping structures and reading materials
High to mid	According to ability	Different groups will be given materials according to their information literacy ability.	This combination will allow differentiated instruction to take place. Materials tailored to each group can be given: groups with higher ability can take on more difficult reading or more complex issues related to the inquiry question.
Mid to low	Mixed ability grouping	Reading materials that is more difficult.	This combination will allow for peer coaching to take place and also misconception to surface during the discussion. Mixed ability grouping will have more diverse views which will allow for a richer discussion. However, if weaker students are unable to do the preparation because of the difficulty of the materials, there is a tendency that they would be swayed to agree with the other students. Weaker students may also end up disengaged and may take a back seat during the discussion.

When planning for the inquiry, I would plan the classroom grouping last and it will be based on the amount of materials that I hope to use in the class. This will also help me determine the number of groups that I will have, and ensure that the inquiry question will be thought-provoking for all students regardless of ability levels.

Dispositions for communication and discussion

Before discussion can be used in the classroom, an open and communicative culture has to be established first. Using ground rules and reinforcing them with classroom practices will allow students to start being sensitive to how they behave. Students learn more effectively when they are aware of lesson expectations. Teachers can facilitate learning by role-modelling behaviours they expect from their students. If we want to create a positive classroom culture that facilitates open discussion, teachers must conduct themselves in ways that support respectful and communicative dispositions for students to follow.

Students must be given time to think

Students must be given time to consider questions that require them to weigh different causal factors and make logical conclusion based on arguments and evidence. *In* order to get our students to think more deeply and broadly about issues, teachers will need to give students time to respond. Sometimes the "wait time" provided in the classroom may not be enough. The initiate-respond-follow-up

(IRF) or feedback chain may be a good starting point when considering discussion strategies. At the same time, the teacher facilitator must check that the questions asked are not just factual recall or "factors-based" questions where students need only short response time to recall or construct arguments. For students to consider issues broadly and deeply, more open-ended questions need to be asked in class. These questions should require students to be more reflective in their thinking, and ones that will allow them to reconsider their own opinions, make or change their stances, all within a reasonable time period. Typically, the one-hour lesson period may not be sufficient for students to reflect, review and reconsider. It is necessary then to encourage students to use their "homework time" to consider some thinking questions, come up with their opinions, and develop preliminary positions. The idea is to create some dissonance at the end of the lesson so that students will be intrigued enough to want to think more and be motivated to draw up some initial conclusions before the next class. When done right, students may surprise with conclusions or opinions that their teachers may not have considered.

Conclusion

Using discussion-based strategy in the classroom has helped me resolve some of the learning difficulties that my students faced, such as the ability to read, analyze and synthesize information to form an opinion about the past. As a pedagogical approach, classroom conversation and discussions can potentially help students overcome some of the challenges that they face when dealing with the past. It was also a learning process for me as I learnt how to ask better questions to help students think deeper about topics and issues, and had become more aware of the importance of giving students space and

time to think. Thinking about history is not easy because of the need to recreate the past using our imagination. However, students may find it more difficult to imagine the past as accurately as possible. This process cannot be rushed. Through the use of discussion-based strategy, the process can be facilitated because it allows for a collective imagination and verbal description to reconstruct aspects of the past. For some students, this may be immediately helpful. Others may need further scaffolding and guidance, but they will benefit from more effective ways of participation in discussion-based activities.

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