Teaching for Historical Understanding through Role-Play

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Introduction

For the average fourteen-year-old student in Singapore, knowledge about the nation's road to independence may be limited to a rather narrow field-of-view, i.e. seen through the actions of leaders from the People's Action Party (PAP), and the events that led to the achievement of independence under Mr. Lee Kuan Yew's leadership. They may not be aware of the different political parties that were vying for political power at the time or the complex circumstances that paved the road towards independence. While the ruling party and our first Prime Minister undoubtedly played a significant role during this period in Singapore's history, the sheer prominence of the dominant political party in the state's narrative may impede students' understanding of the past and their awareness of the diversity of experiences during this period. Students' lack of knowledge about the historical context of post-war Singapore would lead them to view the current government's dominance in Singapore's politics as natural and inevitable. However, to develop deeper historical understandings, students would not only need to know the various personalities, as well as the actions of prominent leaders of the time, but also the reasons and the circumstances that led to the political contest and the PAP's eventual victory in the elections.

How might we design suitable learning experiences that can allow students to appreciate factors that had influenced political developments in Singapore in the 1950s? One way is to perhaps reduce their fixation with attributing significance primarily to the actions of the PAP and to show how other political parties at that point in time were themselves seen as viable options in their own right. A teaching strategy that uses role-play as a centrepiece may help enhance students' historical empathy and enable them to recognize the diversity of perspectives that existed during this complex period.

Issues in teaching the history of Singapore's political development

Chapter 6 of the Lower Secondary History syllabus is titled, *What aspirations did people have for Singapore from 1945 – 1959?* This is an especially challenging topic to teach, and much of it may be due to the inadequate knowledge base that students had to learn prior to this chapter.

In Secondary 1, students who are new to History learnt about Temasek and the founding of Singapore as a British trading port, the reasons why the early migrants came to Singapore and how their living conditions were like in the early 20th century. Then, the coverage moved into World War II and the Japanese Occupation,

which easily fascinated Secondary 2 students with descriptions of battle and accounts of violence and hardship. Post-war events (Chapter 6) followed this exciting and vivid period of Singapore history. This chapter, however, is an incredibly long chapter filled with abstract political concepts that students were seeing for the first time. Terms such as "communism", "democracy" and "political consciousness" came one after another alongside names of historical personalities and political organizations. While accounts of events like the Anti-National Service riots proved exciting for students, it was hard for them to make connections and to make sense of developments as Chapter 6 included many key events: four riots and three elections. Put together, this chapter can be overwhelming for students. Not surprisingly, students may likely end up looking for "easy" answers to the big questions or end up losing interest along the way. Table 1 below offers a description of some challenges teachers may have to contend with when teaching students the events and issues contained within this chapter.

Table 1 Challenges in teaching Chapter 6 of the Singapore Lower History textbook

Issue	Observation	Our Questions
Content Concepts	Students have a superficial understanding of concepts like **communism**, **political consciousness** and **trade unions.** When asked, they cannot remember what these terms mean or they may simply repeat the definition provided in the textbook.	How might we simplify these concepts such that students can understand and grasp their significance?
Making connections	Students learn about the different events in isolation and could not see or explain how they affected each other. They get confused about the different elections and riots and cannot see the "big picture", particularly the developments leading towards independence.	How might we show **change and continuity** in this period without overwhelming students with content and concepts?
Multiple Perspectives	Students are affected by "presentism". According to them, everyone wanted independence at the time and everyone loved the PAP. Communists and riots are bad. The other political parties are doomed to fail.	How might we get students to appreciate the **diversity** of aspirations people had for Singapore in the context of the post-war period?

In addition, as with all topics, the issue of student engagement is also crucial. For the Normal (Academic) classes especially, sustaining their interest had to be deliberate and part of the lesson design.

The approach: Role-play and character cards

In early 2017, I joined the Lower Secondary History Networked Learning Community (NLC) and was relieved to

find that I was not the only teacher who found teaching the events and developments in the 1950s challenging. In one of our meetings, we came to a decision to tackle this issue together and agreed to use role-play as the main instructional tool. Our aim was to develop historical empathy among students by creating opportunities for students to make important connections between one's background and one's aspirations for Singapore.

According to Tumblety (2004), a role-play strategy allows students to realize that the outcomes of historical crises and processes are not inevitable. As Gorvine (1970) argued, "people who live through the actual happenings have difficulty in perceiving a pattern; rather, they often experience a sense of disorder, turbulence, and groping." Role-play techniques, therefore, offer students the opportunity to understand the complexity of human motivations in past events (Beidatsch and Broomhall, 2010). The use of role-play as the main pedagogical tool to teach post-war Singapore history will likely help students to not only navigate the myriad events experienced by the people during that time but also allow them to develop a deeper understanding of people's actions and aspirations in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Role-play can be engaging and can come in various forms in the classroom, from debates to skits and hot-seating. However, for students to take on the roles well, prior preparation is needed so that they understand the perspectives that they are playing. Teachers can consider the use of *character cards* as stimuli for students to launch themselves into the topic and examine how each event affects or changes the characters. As Tarr (2016) explained, "providing each student with a character card as a part of a historical study provides a great way of engaging the class with the role and motives of individuals and the nature and impact of change and continuity." It would seem appropriate then for teachers to augment their use of role-play lesson strategy with character cards to strengthen its affordances.

In demonstrating the use of role-play in the classroom (for the purpose of this article), five groups of people whose aspirations played a significant role in the years leading up to independence were identified, namely, the Singapore Progressive Party (SPP), the Labour Front (LF), the People's Action Party (PAP), Chinese Middle School Students and the Trade Unions. Previous lessons may have been organized chronologically, focusing on the key events and introducing the people involved only when their involvement became apparent in the respective elections or in the occurrence of the riots. For this role-play lesson, the focus was instead placed on the goals of each historical group/player, and how they influenced and were influenced by the different events in the 1950s.

Big Question: What aspirations did people have for Singapore from 1945 – 1959?		
Introduction to content concepts: Communism, democracy, constitution etc.		
Getting to know the parties and people in post-war Singapore		
Characters: SPP, LF, PAP Chinese Middle School Students Trade Unions Other "ordinary" people	**Guiding questions:** Who are they? What did they want for Singapore? How are they going to achieve their goals?	**Historical Concept: Diversity** People had different aspirations based on their background and their experiences
Events and their Consequences		
Events: 1948, 1955, 1959 Elections Anti-NS Riots Hock Lee Bus Riots Chinese Middle School Riots	**Guiding questions:** What happened? What role did the characters play in these events? How did the events affect them?	**Historical Concept: Change and Continuity** People's aspirations can change over time

In coming up with lesson materials and character cards, two sets of cards created by other members of the NLC were used as reference. The character cards were created to be as historically authentic as possible, meaning, they consisted of people who actually existed during that period and that there was some tangible historical basis that supported the background information provided.
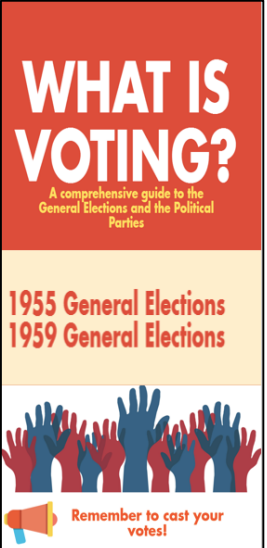
One set of cards focused on the political party leaders and the "activists" (i.e. the Chinese Middle School students and trade unionists). The other set of cards featured the "ordinary" people in Singapore, namely, a bus driver, a hawker, a teacher and a businessman alongside a Chinese student and trade unionist. Both sets of cards were adapted to fit the profile of students and could be used in different ways for different learning outcomes.

Samples of character cards and lesson materials from other NLC members:

Character card of a political party member

David Marshall	Labour Front (formed 1954)	I am David Marshall, born in Singapore to a Jewish family. I was **interned** as a prisoner of war (POW) during the Japanese Occupation. After the war, I went on to become a **prominent** lawyer. But I was always interested in the welfare of workers in Singapore and together with like-minded men, we set up the Labour Front (LF) for this reason – to protect the workers' rights. The LF was multi-racial and included low-income and English-educated members of trade unions. We were anti-communists and believed that we had to work with the British to attain **self-government**. Only through this way, can we improve the rights of the workers and their living conditions. With this goal in mind, the LF under my leadership took part in the 1955 election in order to be part of the new government. Indeed, we won the elections and I went on to become Singapore's first Chief Minister.

A card featuring an ordinary member of the public and materials on elections

Name: Chen Ah Koon
Age: 56 year old
Occupation: Bus driver
Race: Chinese
Highest Education: Primary School

You are a bus driver working for the Hock Lee bus company. Your working hours are very long, your pay is extremely low and your company gives you very little work benefits like medical claims.

You do not really trust the British government because you think that they are always on your employer's side. You depend on your trade union who have promised that they will always fight for your rights and wages.

WHAT IS VOTING?
A comprehensive guide to the General Elections and the Political Parties

1955 General Elections
1959 General Elections

Remember to cast your votes!

SINGAPORE PROGRESSIVE PARTY

Background of party members:

Goals

Would your character vote for them? Why? Why not?

Lesson design and implementation

The target groups for this lesson package included one Sec 2 Express class and one Sec 2 Normal Academic (NA) class. Students in both classes enjoyed working in groups. Students in the Express class (2Exp) were outspoken and liked role play and acting. Students in the 2N(A) class were less vocal and preferred anything to writing. Students from both classes had very little prior knowledge on political issues, but Express students were better at reading and comprehension. With their profiles in mind, a series of lessons was designed and carried out over the course of 4 weeks (actual contact time was around 1.5hrs per week).

Week	Lesson Focus	Method / Activity
1	**Concept Teaching:** Elections, Communism, Democracy, Political consciousness and Constitution	• Direct Instruction on content concepts in the context of Singapore's post-war developments e.g. strikes and Anti-National Service Riots • Assessment of learning through concept cartoon quiz
2	**Aspirations of the different political parties and activists:** SPP, LF, PAP, Trade Unions and Chinese students	• 2Exp: Conduct research based on character cards based on political leaders and activists • 2N(A): Direct instruction on aspirations of the various groups
3		• 2Exp: Role-play and present campaign speech with poster • 2N(A): Recap on the different aspirations and to summarize them in a table
4	**Elections and the responses from the people of Singapore**	• Group discussion using character cards based on ordinary people in Singapore • Groups share reasons for their choice of political party to support.

a. Concept teaching

As Beidatsch and Broomhall (2010) found, role plays on their own were not likely to provide a sufficient learning environment. Students need sufficient preparation and are likely to learn best when supported by other learning experiences such as through lectures and reflections. Content concepts have to first be introduced and explained to students so that they could understand the aspirations of the different characters. As the focus for this project was on the character cards and the use of role play, this part of the lesson was not changed significantly. Direct instruction was used to explain the main idea behind each political term.

Explanation of each political term was simplified, non-judgmental and put in the context of Singapore's history

To check their understanding of the different terms, a short quiz was carried out. According to Dabell (2008), and Keogh and Naylor (1999), concept cartoons can be very useful in grabbing students' attention and can easily draw students into dialogues about the concepts that are represented by them. The cartoons may allow them to understand better abstract or complex ideas and terms. Using concept cartoons would also engage the visual learners and students who encounter difficulty comprehending and expressing themselves in words.
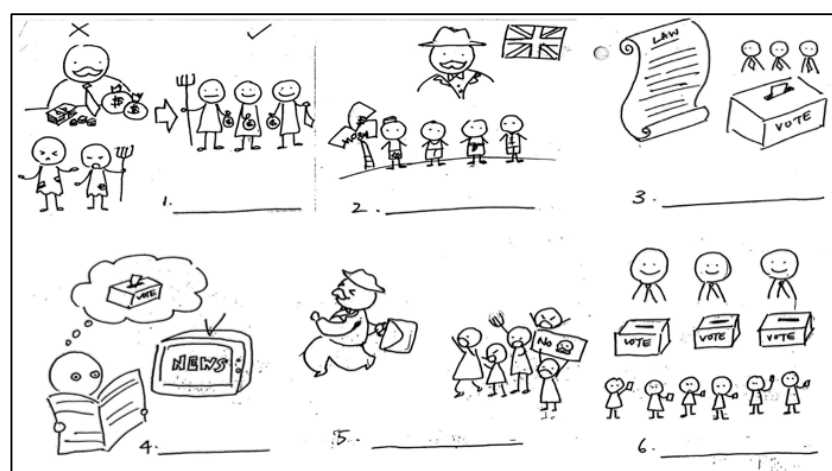
1. Communism   2. Colonialism   3. Constitution

4. Political Consciousness   5. Anti-colonialism   6. Democracy

b. Learning about aspirations of the different political parties and activists

While direct instruction was used to introduce the main political parties and activists to the 2N(A) class, the 2Exp students were given a research and presentation task. This was part of the experiment with the character cards featuring the political leaders from the different parties in the 1950s. Given the difficulty of the language used in websites and online articles about the political parties, the task was more suited for the 2Exp students. Direct instruction also gave the teacher more time for recap and consolidation of the content concepts and information with the 2N(A) students.

Character cards based on political leaders

The 2Exp students were brought to the computer lab for the research part of the lesson package and were given time to read up on the political parties or groups they were assigned. They were tasked to construct an election poster and write up a campaign speech that would represent their party or group. The character cards served to provide some background information on key personalities; the quotations included were meant to allow the students to make inferences on their respective aspirations.

In the following lesson, each group was expected to present their campaign speech and to try to get the rest of the class to support their vision for Singapore. While the groups presented and gave their speeches, students had to take down the information about each party's background, aspirations and methods in their handouts so that they would all be "on the same page" for the next lesson.

c. Elections and the responses from the people of Singapore

Now that students have developed an understanding of the aspiration of the

various parties, their next task was to determine (a) who would be able to win the support of the people in Singapore in the elections and (b) why they were able to do so. However, a general poll that was conducted at the end of the 2Exp presentations showed that the students were predisposed to simply vote for the parties they researched on out of "loyalty" to their group. Even when prompted to not vote based on their groups, students overwhelmingly chose the PAP. When asked why they chose the PAP, their answers ran along the lines of *"They confirm win one, what!"* or *"The PAP want independence, so must vote for them right*?" It was presentism at work here, and this use of hindsight and present knowledge had prompted students to make flawed but seemingly obvious conclusions. Something was needed to move them out of that frame of mind and to think more critically about why the parties would appeal to different groups of people.

Here, the second set of cards comprising the "ordinary" people of Singapore came into play. After going through a recap on the aspirations of the different parties, students were given the cards and asked to decide which party their character(s) would vote for in the 1955 elections. They also had to explain their choices in the handout given and to subsequently present their views to the rest of the class.

Groups in the 2Exp class each received a set of six character cards. Each student picked a card and shared his or her opinion about the character to the group so that they could complete the handout. For the 2N(A) class, each group received one character card. They discussed and made a decision on which party their character would likely vote for and later shared about their character's decision to the rest of the class.

The character cards based on "ordinary" people in Singapore

Name: Siti Nordiana
Age: 29 year old
Occupation: Hawker
Race: Malay
Highest Education: Primary School

You are married with 6 children. Your husband works as an odd-job labourer and jobs have been difficult to find. You sell curry puffs on the streets to earn more money for your family.
You constantly worry if there's enough money to feed your children and send them to school.

Name: Chen Ah Koon
Age: 56 year old
Occupation: Bus driver
Race: Chinese
Highest Education: Primary School

You are a bus driver working for the Hock Lee bus company. Your working hours are very long, your pay is extremely low and your company gives you very little work benefits like medical claims.
You do not really trust the British government because you think that they are always on your employer's side. You depend on your trade union who have promised that they will always fight for your rights and wages.

Name: Soh Loh Boon
Age: 18 years old
Occupation: Student
Education: Secondary School

You are studying in a Chinese school. Your textbooks are from China and your classes are in Chinese. Your school receives little support from the government and most of the funding comes from Chinese Clan Associations. The British also recently banned all people who visited China from returning to Singapore, making it impossible for you to get a university education. In addition, most high paying jobs and government jobs require fluency in English.

Name: Tan Eng Joo
Age: 40 years old
Occupation: Businessman
Race: Chinese
Highest Education: University degree

You are an English-speaking, highly educated businessman. Your company deals in rubber. Before the war, you had a lot of business dealings with the British. Business is good but you are worried that the strikes is disrupting your business operations.
Your children all attend English medium schools and your family have adopted English ways of dressing, customs and past-times.

Name: Mae Oehlers
Age: 40 year old
Occupation: Teacher in Raffles Girls' School
Race: Eurasian
Highest Education: Teaching Diploma

You were born in Singapore and come from a prominent Eurasian family who is well-connected to the British. You were among the first to enrol in the earliest English language schools when they were set up and enjoyed a good education. This has enabled you to secure comfortable employment, in both public and private sectors.

Name: Jamit Singh
Age: 28 year old
Occupation: Trade Union Secretary
Race: Sikh
Highest Education: Undergraduate

You feel that it is important to improve the lives of the workers as many of them were not able to make ends meet in the post-war period.
You were recruited into the trade union because you can speak English and are working to persuade the management of the Harbour board to increase the wages and reduce shorter working hours for their workers.

Students' responses and evaluation of the lesson package

As a whole, students responded well to the new lesson package and were better engaged compared to previous years.

A. Response to the concept lesson

For the concept lesson, the quiz and visualization using cartoons were helpful. While the cartoons were simply drawn, the quiz was able to capture the students' attention and tested their understanding of the concepts taught. For the 2N(A) class especially, the visual representation helped them to understand the concepts better (than words) and was a handy reference for them in the next few lessons when the terms came up.

By explaining their answers to their friends, students were able to demonstrate their understanding of the concepts and made their misconceptions known. For example, a 2N(A) student articulated: "*See, there's people who are very rich and people very poor, then there's a cross, which means it is wrong. They want people to be equal, and then they will be happy and smiling. That is communism.*" While not expressed in academic language, the explanation did show the essence of the concept as needed for a basic understanding of Singapore in the 1950s.

B. Response to the research task on political parties

The 2Exp students were visibly engaged while doing research on their respective parties and groups. They also enjoyed listening to their friends giving speeches while they were in their roles as political leaders. They also asked questions when the speakers were unclear in their ideas or presentations.

Students enjoyed the role play by their classmates who could speak confidently
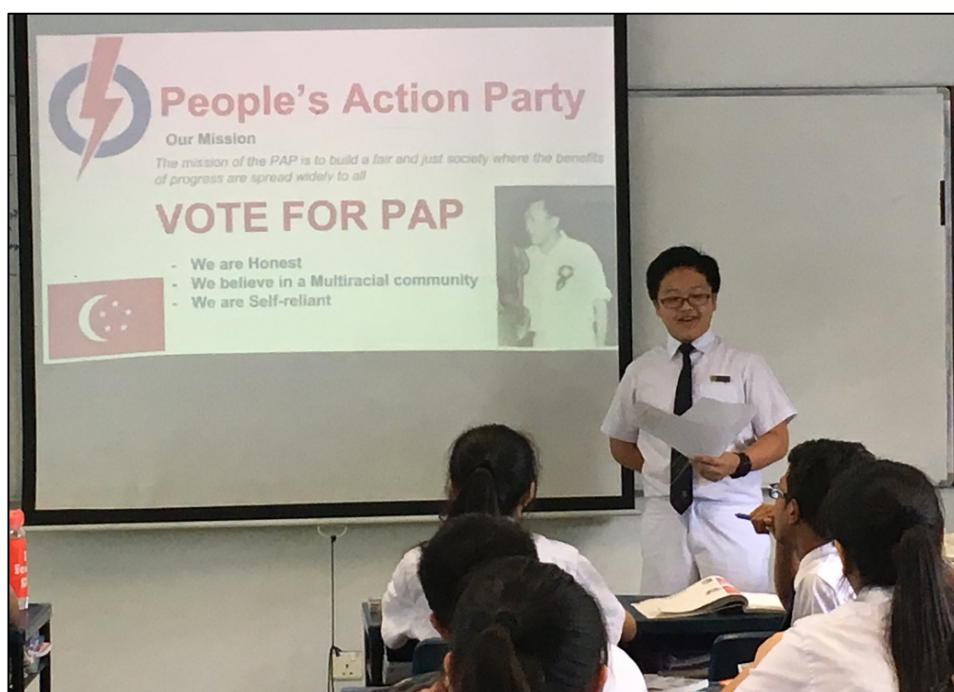
However, a drawback to this task was that speeches by party leaders like Lee Kuan Yew and David Marshall could easily be found online. Some groups simply copied and read out their speeches verbatim without thinking the contents through. Naturally, they could not answer their classmates when asked about the details and terms used in the speeches.

The handout given also allowed the students from both classes to summarize the aspirations and methods used by the different parties. This allowed students to compare them easily for the next activity.

C. Student responses to the elections and role-play strategy

Using the character cards of the ordinary people in Singapore helped enhance students' understanding of the elections. As mentioned previously, many students had overwhelmingly "voted" for the PAP before the activity. The character cards were able to capture the students'

attention and provided enough information for them to discuss and think about the decision from their respective points of view. From the sharing in class, the students appeared better able to explain why different people would support the different parties.

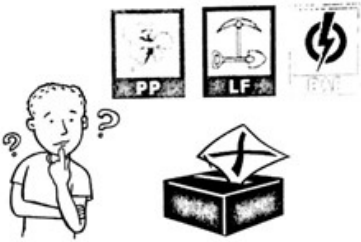Some examples of what they said included:

- *I am a Chinese businessman who has dealings with the British. I will vote for SPP to protect my business. PAP and Labour Front are both working with trade unions and this is against my interests.*

- *I am a Malay food seller and I will vote for the PAP as they promised to fight for merger. This sounds good as joining Malaya will provide more job opportunities for my husband as joining a larger country should be good for business.*

- *I am a Eurasian teacher and I will support SPP as they promised to cooperate with the British. As I myself have links with the British, I don't want my way of life to change and the SPP seem to be the safest party to vote for.*

- *I am a bus driver and I will vote for either PAP or Labour Front. I feel that the British are not treating me well and these two parties are both anti-British so I think they will both be able to fight for better working conditions for me.*

Most groups were able to articulate fairly logical and reasonable answers for whichever party they were voting for. Students were also quick to offer alternative answers when they felt that their classmates were wrong. At the end of the session, both classes concluded that the Labour Front and the PAP were likely to be victorious in the 1955 elections as the majority of the working-class people of Singapore would support them, as compared to the SPP.

Handout completed to show how the different characters would vote in the 1955 elections

People and Parties
In the 1955 and 1959 elections, the people of Singapore could choose between a few parties to be their representatives in the government. Who would they support? What were their considerations?

Character	Party they support in 1955 elections	Reason
Chinese student	PAP (People's Action Party)	Want the British colonial rule to end. - PAP promised immediate independence
Bus Driver	Labour Front (LF)	- They promised to protect workers' rights.
Malay Food Seller	LF / PAP	Protecting workers' interest (LF) Merge with Malaya (PAP)
Chinese Businessman	SPP (Singapore Progressive Party)	SPP would cooperate with the British and the Chinese Businessman -SPP works w/ British w/ will ensure English speaking and they already adopted the British way of living
Eurasian teacher	SPP	Have ties with the British
Trade Unionist	Labour Front → PAP →	Labour Front sought to protect workers' interests → works w/ trade unions

business will continue proper

Would the party that these people support change in the 1959 elections? How and why so?

Evaluation of lesson

Compared to previous years when direct instruction was used to describe the political parties and the outcomes of the elections, students were a lot more engaged and invested in the outcome of the elections with the role-play activity. Instead of giving generic answers for why a certain party won the election, like "the PAP won because they promised merger", they can now explain how the promises made by the different parties would affect people living in Singapore, and who they would appeal to. The cartoons and the presentations also helped students remember the concepts and political terms.

In many ways, the lesson package helped the students understand this complex chapter at a more engaged and deeper level. The concept of diversity came out strongly in the role-play and the discussion of the elections. Change and continuity was seen in the developments and differences that took place between the 1948 and 1955 elections.

On the other hand, there were areas that could be improved. These include:

1. Research task needs to be better scoped

As mentioned, it was disappointing that some groups simply read out past speeches by the political leaders and this showed that they had not bothered to think about the aspirations of the particular political party/leader. Moreover, using the character cards with political leaders was not that effective as students tended to focus too much on the individuals when, in reality, there had been greater diversity of opinions and backgrounds within each party. For example, simply knowing about Lee Kuan Yew, but not the likes of Lim

Chin Siong and the Chinese trade unionists who threw in their lot with him may give a skewed understanding of the PAP, its motivation, goals and aspirations. This is most likely one of the main reasons why the Labour Front and the PAP appeared to be so similar to the students. As could be seen in the sample worksheet, the students seemed to think the two parties were identical and interchangeable.

2. More materials / scaffolding needed for "Chinese Students" and "Trade Unions"

There is a wealth of information online on political parties like the Labour Front and the PAP but not sufficient on trade unions and the Chinese middle school students – beyond the riots and strikes they were known for. The groups that were assigned these two areas had a lot more difficulty in crafting their presentations and could not clearly articulate what they really wanted. More scaffolding for the students would be required to help them understand these two groups of people better. One possibility was to tie them to a particular event e.g. Anti-National Service Riots for the Chinese students and the Hock Lee Bus Riots for the trade unions.

3. Refinement to the election process

While the character cards and group discussions helped to engage students, the element of "voting" in an election and counting the votes in a physical mock election potentially excited students and further demonstrated to them the complexity of the elections. Yet, the context of the elections, for e.g. who could vote, who would be voting, etc., was not well brought out. This would be another layer of complexity that could be included in the next iteration of this lesson package.

Summary of lesson outcomes and areas of improvement:

Lesson	Evaluation of Student learning	Possible improvements
Concept teaching	Most students were able to remember the concepts taught as shown through the quiz Strength(s): • Quiz was easy to implement and able to engage the students' attention. • Students could explain how they decided on their answers. • Opportunity to clarify misconceptions. • Convenient reference for next few lessons. Weakness(es): • Students may still not be able to explain the terms properly in written assessments.	Extend the activity to get students to try to create their own cartoons for a few other concepts after trying the quiz as a way to test their understanding
Role-play of political speeches	Students could see that there was diversity in the aspirations of people for Singapore after WWII. There is a change in people's attitude towards the British and their aspirations for Singapore. Strength(s): • Students were engaged and had fun during the role-play. The poster and speech allowed them to express themselves creatively. • Most groups were able to identify the aspirations and methods correctly. • Handout allowed students to summarise and compare the parties conveniently. Weakness(es): • Some groups copied past speeches without really understanding them • Focused on the individual political leaders instead of the party, which may not be representative. This made it difficult to understand events later on in the chapter. • Groups researching on trade unions and Chinese students had more difficulty as there is less information about them online.	Character cards with individual leaders may not be that helpful for this stage as it makes students focus too much on the individual. More scaffolding for the research could help students, especially for the groups doing trade unions and the Chinese students. Links to events could be explored.

| Class discussion of the 1955 elections | Students could see the diversity in perspectives among the ordinary people in Singapore and was able to explain why the PAP and Labour Front could win the support of the locals. They could see that the PAP's win was not a given.

Strength(s):
• Students were engaged by the character cards and were focused during the time allocated for group discussions
• Students were able to express their views and justify their choice of party
• Handout allowed students to summarise and see the spectrum of opinions.

Weakness(es):
• PAP and Labour Front were not clearly differentiated.
• Did not take into account those who could and could not vote in 1955, nor the proportion of the different types of people in Singapore. | Have a real poll where students could indicate their votes on voting slips may increase student engagement further.

Extension question could be introduced for students to review how realistic their election results were.

Links to assessment – students can do paragraph writing explaining the election results. |

Conclusion

Politics and political developments may not be as exciting and dramatic as the Japanese Occupation for many students but this project showed that these topics need not be entirely boring. Using role-play and character cards allowed students to consider events from diverse or multiple perspectives, and to develop empathy with characters/personalities they were assigned. As such, their historical understanding of the period was enhanced and "history" for them became not a just series of "what happened" but also "why things happened", and "why they still matter".

Tweaking and implementing the lesson package with a mock election in 2018

This lesson package was refined and implemented in 2018, with the main change being the introduction of a mock election with the use of character cards. The students were given voting slips and encouraged to cast their votes as part of their roles. Students were visibly excited and cheered while the voting slips were opened and counted. They were also eager to find out if their class's votes matched what happened in the past and if not, why that was so. Clearly, having had to step in the shoes of a character and made a choice to support one of the parties, they were invested in the outcome and wanted explanations for what happened.

The use of role-play had opened up many possibilities to challenge pre-conceived notions about the past. It also generated questions that made for rich and meaningful classroom discussions. While the project may not have been able to address all the challenges stated at the start, it presented a way for students to see that in history, there is never a single straightforward answer. Instead, the answer often starts the same way – with "It depends..."

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