

What does it mean to make comparisons?

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Abstract

The comparison of sources forms a cornerstone of the historical discipline; however, there remains room for exploration in terms of what are the various moves that goes into the operations of comparing between sources. This article examines the role of comparisons, and corroborations, in academic History, and gleams from it meaningful considerations and processes that can potentially inform classroom practices.

Introduction

The analogy of “detective work” has often been invoked to explain the discipline of history and the role of evidential use to students - activities such as the “Mystery Suitcase” proved to be useful in illustrating the role of evidence in the historian’s craft (Hoodless, 1994). This analogy is a logical one as the sound use of evidence can generate knowledge about the past that possesses a high degree of fidelity to the truth, even if the objectivity of such evidence and a historian’s presentist biases can be called into question (Carr, 1966; Hurst, 1981). While history does not purport to fully be able to recapture lost worlds and mentalities, the discipline does at least aspire to create a functioning model of the past that best approximates what human motivations and societies were like. The judicious use of primary sources hence forms a cornerstone of the discipline.

As the emphasis of classroom history

has shifted away from knowing about the past, towards an understanding of the disciplinary underpinnings of how such knowledge about the past was generated, the role of evidence in history inevitably plays an important role in the secondary school classroom as well (McAleavy, 1998). Considering that the role of classroom history is not to train students to be historians, but rather to imbue them with a set of meaningful thinking processes that can be transferred to other pursuits and help students navigate the complex world that they will find themselves in (Ministry of Education, 2013: 6-7) , disciplinary understandings such as evidential use is even more relevant than before. In the Singaporean secondary school context, this translates into the use of inquiry-based learning in the classroom, and the use of source-based case studies in formal assessments. Nestled within these two broad bodies of pedagogies, is the task of *making comparisons* of sources.

Beyond understanding the position that comparisons occupy within the discipline and the inquiry process, the actual act of comparing two sources is also a challenge. Given that the casual act of making comparisons is a fundamental mental move that an individual will perform on a daily basis, dissecting the process of making comparisons for the purposes of classroom instruction can be a challenging one. The act of making comparisons represents the simultaneous operation of inductive reasoning and classification. In order to elucidate on the role of history within the

inquiry process and the mental process of making comparisons, this paper will examine the role of comparisons and corroboration in the historical discipline, and breakdown the different uses of comparisons when constructing historical

Comparisons and Corroboration within the Historical Discipline

The nature of *comparisons* and its role in knowledge production has been a fixture of epistemological debates - classical thinkers such as John Locke and Friedrich Hegel, for instance, argued that comparisons are an essential tool that allows one to know something with certainty (Morlino, 2018). Auguste Comte took that understanding further by arguing that the act of comparing is a means of testing an inference empirically (Comte, 1864). Comparisons within disciplinary history are similarly an act of knowledge creation, and a means of ensuring that the understandings generated through a historical inquiry can indeed be deemed knowledge.

Historians are engaged with three forms

of knowledge. Subsequently, the paper will then discuss the translation of these understanding into classroom instruction, and look at instructional methods that takes into account the process of making comparisons.

of comparisons, broadly divided based on the nature of the sources that are being compared. Beyond the comparison of sources, historians might also choose to make comparisons between substantial case studies of historical events. This could be seen from popular works comparing various modes of imperialism, such as features of the “American Empire” as opposed to the British Empire (Ferguson, 2004), or even at the Singaporean ‘A’-Levels, where various Southeast Asian countries’ experiences of colonialism and independence were examined in tandem with each other (Ministry of Education, 2020: 7). This mode of comparative work is not being discussed in this paper as those methodologies are more commonly used in the social sciences and area studies, and sits atop the more fundamental source-comparisons that form a part of the historian’s toolkit for most occasions.

Table 1. Summary of the different forms of comparisons that are performed by historians.

Sources being Compared	Purpose
Primary-Primary	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Contextualisation of new sources within the existing body of sources. 2. Seeking corroboration of sources in order to generate a holistic image of the past.
Primary-Secondary	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Challenging pre-existing historical accounts and narratives of historians through contradictory sources, leading to revisionist scholarship.
Secondary-Secondary	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reviewing the existing literature, and identifying gaps in the literature for further research and contribution.

Each of these forms of comparisons serves a different purpose, as summarized by Table 1 above. First, when historians compare between secondary sources as part of a literature review process or when engaging in historiographical debates. Examples of such a comparison between secondary sources could be seen from John Lewis Gladdis' *The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis on the Origins of the Cold War* (1983), where he compared the revisionist and post-revisionist accounts of the origins of the Cold War. The process of secondary-secondary source comparisons helps historians identify gaps in the existing state of historical understanding, and locate incision points where novel research and contributions can be made.

Second, when historians make comparisons between primary and secondary sources, it was often carried out with the intention to challenge pre-existing historical accounts of other historians by presenting new and sometimes contradictory sources - an effective challenge would therefore amount to revisionism. Given that a historical account itself is typically made up of conclusions derived from the curated study of sources, the comparisons between primary and secondary sources hence have the potential to challenge or support the basis upon which historical accounts are constructed. Using Gladdis as an example again, after the collapse of the USSR, he revised his post-revisionist stance on the origins of the Cold War using Soviet sources that were becoming available, and subsequently abandoned his own post-revisionist stance (Gladdis, 1997).

Third, when historians make comparisons between multiple primary sources, there tend to be two goals. The first goal is that a comparison is meant to determine whether a source can be used in a meaningful manner as evidence. A

historian would carry out comparisons with the intention to test for the typicality, reliability and utility of a source. Should these sources not be deemed reliable or useful, it might form the basis to discount these sources as evidence. The second goal is to use multiple sources in conjunction with each other to reconstruct an accurate image of the past. The broad use of sources can serve to create a nuanced and accurate understanding of the past. However, the direct close-reading comparison of primary sources are rarely seen within historical writing - rather, it was a process that was carried out in the mind of the historian before putting pen to paper.

Despite the rarity, the 2000 Irving v. Lipstadtⁱ libel trial provides a rare incision point where insights into this vital historian's process could be examined. As a background, historian Deborah Lipstadt argued in her 1993 book that David Irving was a Holocaust denierⁱⁱ who had manipulated and distorted historical documents in order to support his conclusions. David Irving, writer of popular history books on World War II and the Holocaust, argued that his denialist stance was based on the sound use of the historical process, and filed a libel suits against Lipstadt and her publisher. Whilst a libel suit, its core issue was really what constituted "good" historical methods, and what are the standards that a historical account needs to meet before it could be considered "truth" or "knowledge". History, was on trial (Lipstadt, 2005; Evans, 2002).

Expert witnesses such as Peter Longerich, Richard Evans and Christopher Browning were called upon to provide testimonies and analysis of the two historians' evidential use. For instance, Irving claimed that his arguments were based upon the fact that there was no written order from Hitler ordering a genocide of Jews, and that the daily reports

from Auschwitz does not state deaths in the gas chambers - hence leaving open the possibility that bulk of the deaths were from other tragedies of war, such as starvation and disease, not genocide. Furthermore, Irving argued that the German plan was to resettle the Jewish people, rather than exterminate them, pointing to the heavy use of the words “resettlement” and “deportation” in German documents.

However, expert witnesses demonstrated, through a web of corroborating evidence that “resettlement” was merely a euphemism for extermination. While Irving claimed that evidence such as Hitler’s 25 October 1941 conversation with officials as proof that there was no genocide, as seen below:

‘Let nobody tell me,’ Hitler added, ‘that despite that we can’t park them in the marshier parts of Russia!’ ‘By the way,’ he added, ‘it’s not a bad thing that public rumour attributes to us a plan to exterminate the Jews.’ He pointed out, however, that he had no intention of starting anything at present. ‘There’s no point in adding one’s difficulties at a time like this!’ (Irving, 1996).ⁱⁱⁱ

When read in a vacuum, it might be reasonable to conclude that in late-1941, Hitler’s preferred plan to the so-called *Jewish Question* was deportation and resettlement in parts of Russia. However, through the use of source comparisons, it was demonstrated that Hitler was referring to the July 1941 *Schutzstaffel* operations to drive Soviet Jews into the Pripet marshes, in which these Jews did not drown because the marshes were not deep enough (Evans, 2002: 78-9). When read in conjunction with each other, the original source from Irving took on a different meaning - Hitler was not discussing the feasibility of resettlement programmes, but rather lamenting the failure of a specific mode of extermination.

The various flashpoints from the Irving-Lipstadt trial highlighted the role of comparisons in generating historical knowledge, through the ability to contextualise sources and generating a more holistic image of what happened in the past.

From this short examination of historians and their work, what could be seen is first, a comparison that is deeply embedded in the inquiry and investigation process of a historian. It was used by Gladdis to identify areas for new research and to critique the existing literature, it was used by Evans and Longerich to contextualise sources in order to find out whether the Holocaust was an intentional state-led genocide. Second, the act of comparing hinges upon the simultaneous inferences derived from the source, and the subsequent classification of these sources into related or unrelated buckets - as seen from Evans’ analysis of Hitler’s conversations, after gaining corroboration from other sources, he concludes that both sources demonstrates the intention to commit genocide.

Challenges and Issues of Source Comparison in the Classroom Context

As a part of the disciplinary-turn in history education, comparisons have also featured in both classroom practices and formal assessments. In the Singaporean classroom, comparisons feature as a part of source-based case studies, and beyond questions that directly demand a comparison, it also plays an integral role in testing for reliability, usefulness, and typicality (Ministry of Education, 2012) through the use of cross-referencing. However, there are two challenges when attempting to develop source-comparison skills in the classroom - first, these questions tends to be asked in a manner that is detached from the inquiry process, and

runs the risk of degenerating into a source-comprehension exercise rather than an act of authentic source analysis in pursuing a historical inquiry; second, creating meaningful scaffolds for comparisons beyond writing frames.

While each of these acts of comparison mirrors a step in the historical inquiry process, there is very little reference to the rationale and the position of each source-based question within the inquiry process within the framing of the formal assessments. This disembodiment often translates into classroom instruction. For instance, students are challenged to make comparisons between two sources through questions such as “how similar are Sources A and B?”. Comparison as a *historical skill* ought to make the distinction between students who made comparisons because they were capable of understanding the sources, and hence display linguistic abilities, and students who made comparisons because these students understand the role that such a comparison plays in generating meaningful historical understandings about the issues within the case-studies.

Furthermore, the source comparison activities are often planned without reference to the nature of the sources that were being compared, as previously outlined in Table 1. The goal of comparing between primary-primary, primary-secondary, and secondary-secondary sources are different and therefore when designing activities for the classroom, it is important to adjust the nature of questions with reference to the types of sources that are being compared and the inquiry objectives of such a comparison. An inquiry-driven approach in the classroom has the potential to deepen understanding and learning by providing students a clear rationale for the activities that they are participating in, and also has long-term

benefits on a student’s disciplinary literacy and thinking dispositions (Shanahan and Shanahan, 2014)

Furthermore, the manner that comparisons are scaffolded in the classroom tends to be heavily product-driven. Common scaffolding in the classroom has a tendency to focus on deliverables that a student needs to produce - such as a “basis of comparison”, “matching evidence”, and “explanations”. This stands in opposition to scaffolding the processes that underpins the act of making comparisons, which is fundamentally an inquiry-driven act of making comparisons. While product-driven writing frames have their place in the classroom, the goal of developing disciplinary dispositions are better served through activities that would deepen the thinking processes of students.

Comparisons as an Inquiry-driven act of Classification

Building on the challenges and concerns raised in the previous section, there are two sets of objectives when designing classroom activities that are geared towards developing students’ comfort and dispositions in making source comparisons. First, it is to embed the act of source comparisons within the broader historical inquiry framework and communicate that within the classroom context. Second, it is to provide a series of scaffolding that encourages students to deepen their thought processes when interacting with sources. Using the Secondary 1 history classroom as an example, this section will outline a few possible strategies that hope to achieve the goals laid out above.

With the goal of embedding classroom activities for comparison within an inquiry, the following questions outlined in Table 2 can be considered. These questions aim to steer the design of comparison activities

towards one that is inquiry-centric, and encourages students to consider the objectives of making such a comparison

within the context of investigating and generating knowledge about the past.

Table 2. Questions to consider when designing comparison activities in the classroom. An example of a class activity designed with these principles can be found in Annex I.

Considerations	Example
Overarching inquiry	What was education like in the 19th century?
Types of sources being compared	Primary-primary sources
Objective of comparison	To check, through corroborating evidence, if the experiences of students in colonial Singapore were commonplace in the 19th century.
Phrasing of question, with the aim of conveying the nature of this comparison	Did students in colonial Singapore experience a similar education to each other? Elaborate and explain your answer.

The objective of the inquiry, and the types of sources that are being compared, will inevitably influence the types of questions that are being raised in the classroom. While more advanced students of history might reverse-engineer or retrospectively create a set of inquiry intentions of a source comparison exercise, this set of considerations serves to ensure that all source comparison activities have disciplinary intentions embedded in them, weaker learners might not. The inability to see the broader purpose of making the specified source comparison reduces a student’s ability to effectively interact with the sources. Therefore, the set of considerations above will benefit beginners to history and weaker learners, because this

intentionality in design will have the effect of directing and focusing a student’s attention when approaching the sources through question phrasing and source selection

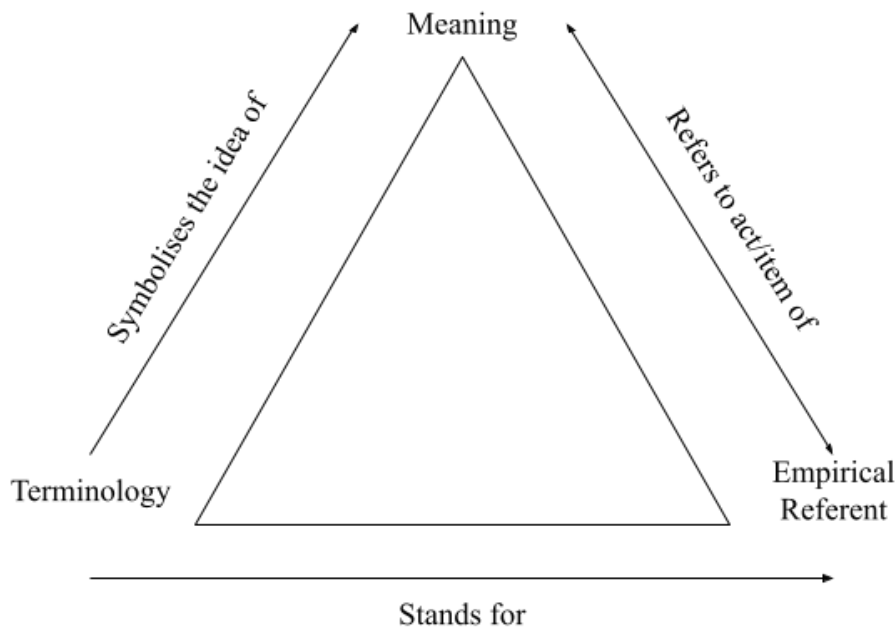
Second, after setting up the inquiry intentions of the comparison activity, there are also a series of potential scaffolds that can be utilised in order to encourage the acquisition of source-work skills and not merely product-mastery. As alluded to in the earlier sections, the act of making comparisons has two elements that operate simultaneously - to make meaning out of the source, and to subsequently classify these sources according to the ideas they are conveying. Each of these elements presents

opportunities for scaffolding and differentiation within the classroom.

Each source is a series of ideas that are the compound of terminology, meaning, and an empirical referent (Ogden, 1930), whose relationship with each other are outlined in Figure 1. Within this framework, *terminology* refers to the choice of words that were featured in the source; while the *empirical referent* are concrete real-world

examples that can be used to illustrate these words. The intermediary between *terminology* and *empirical referent* is the *meaning* of the word. In most instances, a source will outline the terminology and provide an empirical referent, but will omit meaning, and leave it to the reader to make sense of the source. Collectively, when reading sources, a reader is essentially attempting to derive these generalised ideas from the source by considering these three components of the source.

Figure 1. A simplified representation of the Ogden and Richards Triangle.



How this might potentially translate into the classroom is being illustrated in Figure 2. Students were asked to identify meaning, terminology, and empirical referent, and are encouraged to use the three items to develop a generalised understanding of what the source is attempting to point out.

While this framing might be exhaustive when approaching simpler sources, especially at the lower-secondary level, it has the potential to help students make meaning out of more complicated sources that they might encounter in the context of upper-secondary history.

Figure 2. Illustration of classroom scaffolding to assist students in sense-making when reading sources, adapted from Odgen and Richard’s Triangle. Refer to Annex II for an example of a completed diagram.

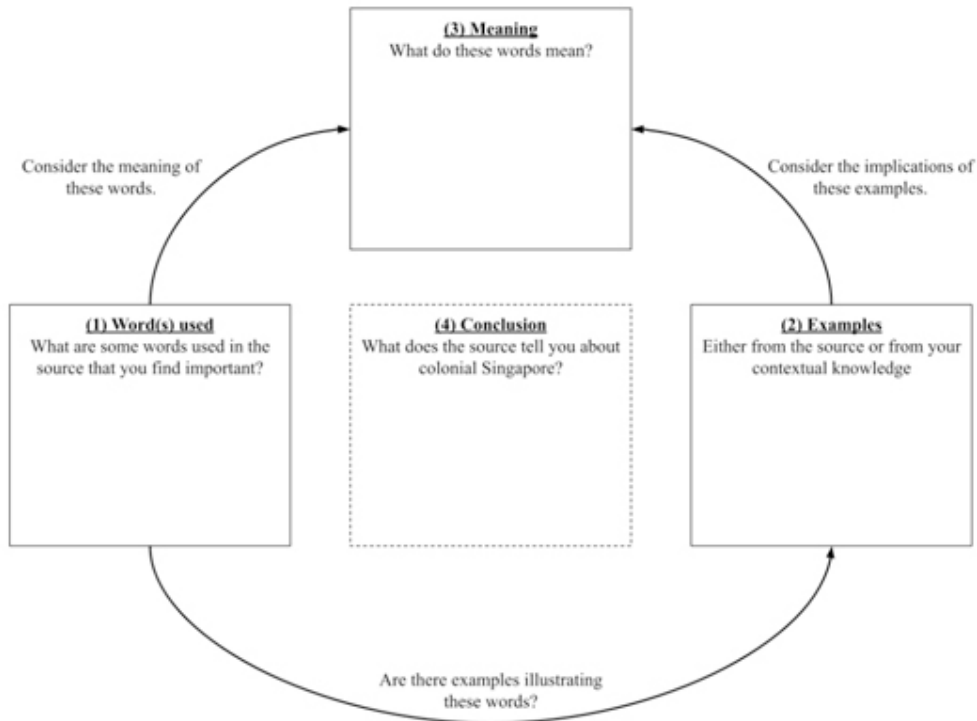
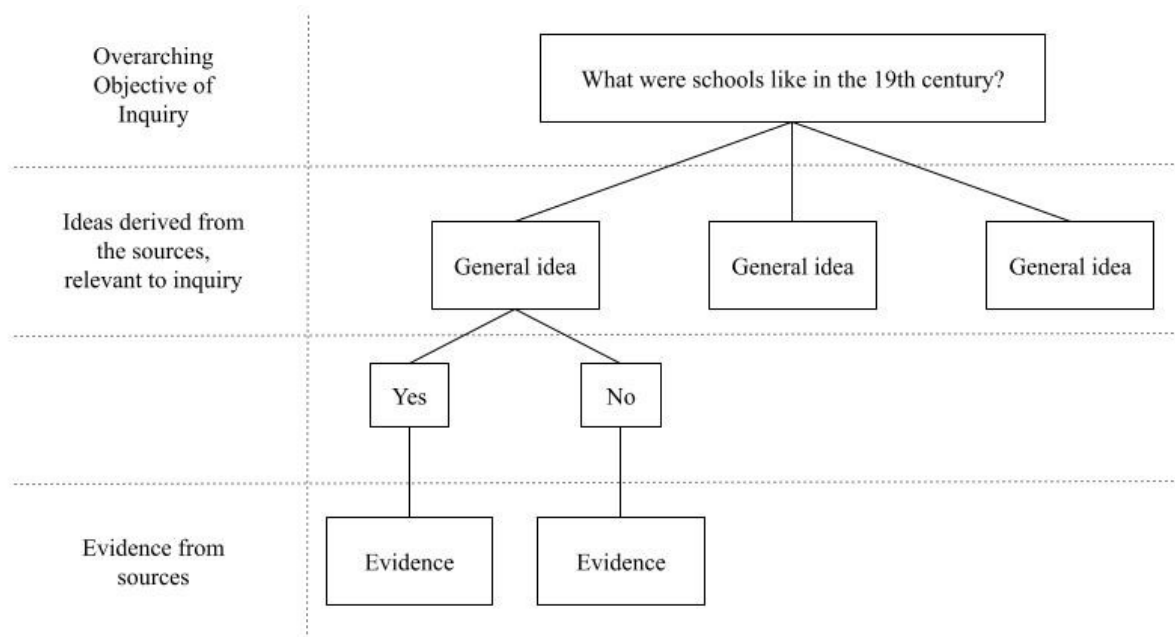


Figure 3. Illustrating how the Tree of Porphyry can be implemented in the classroom. Refer to Annex III for an example of a completed diagram.



After having identified the topography of the sources, the next challenge for students would be to make comparisons between sources. As mentioned earlier, when making comparisons, it essentially entails the classification of the ideas contained within the sources into different categories. Rather than challenging students to identify a “basis of comparison” from the onset, it would be more beneficial to students by helping them make sense of the ideas from multiple sources. This could be carried out through the use of a *tree of porphyry*. This branching tree of classification originated as a means of classifying the natural world - still seen today in taxonomic diagrams - but is relevant in source comparisons as the objective of comparisons are inherently attempting to classify aspects of sources that are similar to each other and that are different from each other (Goertz, 2006: 69-94).

The *tree of porphyry* allows students to organise their understandings derived from the two sources into a classification tree, where similarities and differences can quickly be identified and made sense of, as illustrated in Figure 3. After making sense of the sources, the general ideas derived from the sources are then arranged at the top tier of the classification tree. Each generalised idea has the potential for an opposing viewpoint, whether it exists in the two sources or not - and students are encouraged to consider the opposing viewpoint before concluding if the sources have sufficient information to support that viewpoint. Through this tree of classification, students will be able to organise the various ideas presented in the sources, and also use it as a guide to further pry the sources.

Through the *Odgen and Richards Triangle* and the *Tree of Porphyry*, learners will be able to approximate some of the

heuristics that historians commonly use to engage in source comparison. These scaffolding, along with a clearer view of the role of comparisons in a historical inquiry, aims to achieve a more precise manner of guiding students towards sound evidential use in history, and to promote a deeper level of interaction with historical sources.

Conclusion

Carr (1961: 30) remarked that “history, [is] an unending dialogue between past and present”. Hence the challenge for history educators would be to assist our students in making their first engagements with this dialogue. A critical part of that dialogue remains the use of sources and evidence to test the claims of interpretations and verify the veracity of other sources (Evans, 2012: 127-8).

Therefore, the role of making source comparisons within the discipline history cannot be understated. Through a closer examination of the various roles that comparisons play towards the construction of historical knowledge, meaningful and alternative classroom tools. While these tools are geared towards the development of source-based literacy and skills, and do not necessarily have an analogue with the structures and frameworks of the formal assessments, however, by developing the disciplinary dispositions and reasoning of students, it is hoped that it would translate to relative excellence in assessment settings.

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ⁱ Full name of trial: *David Irving v Penguin Books and Deborah Lipstadt*

ⁱⁱ While there are many varieties of Holocaust deniers, David Irving's stance was that there was no systematic, state-led, attempt to kill all European Jews, even as he concedes that there were individual atrocities and massacres of Jews during World War II. Therefore, while many may have died in the war, he argued that the extent of Jewish deaths from Nazi Germany's intentional massacres could not have exceeded one million.

ⁱⁱⁱ Translation note: David Irving's translation of Hitler's 25 October 1941 *Table Talk* has been heavily criticized for its inaccuracy and over-simplification by mainstream historians.