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Re-visiting Historical Literacy: towards a disciplinary pedagogy

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In J. K. Rowling's (200?) *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* we see evidence of the

public stereotypes that inform opinion about how history is taughtⁱ;

History of Magic was by common consent the most boring subject ever devised by wizard kind. Professor Binns, their ghost teacher, had a wheezy, droning voice that was almost guaranteed to cause severe drowsiness within ten minutes, five in warm weather. He never varied the form of their lessons, but lectured them without pausing while they took notes, or rather, gazed sleepily into space ... Today they suffered an hour and half's droning on the subject of giant wars (p. 206-7)

and a little later;

He was finding it very difficult to remember names and kept confusing dates. He simply skipped question four (In your opinion, did wand legislation contribute to, or lead to better control of, goblin riots of the eighteenth century?) thinking that he would go back to it if he had time at the end. He had a stab at question five (How was the statute of secrecy breached in 1749 and what measures were introduced to prevent a recurrence?) but had a nagging suspicion that he had missed several important points ... He looked ahead for a question he could definitely answer and his eyes alighted upon number ten. Describe the circumstances that led to the formation of the International Confederation of Wizards and explain why the warlocks of Liechtenstein refused to join I know this, Harry thought, though his brain felt torpid and slack. (p.639)

At the same time as suffering from an image problem implied in these quotes, school history has been seen as a significant school subject, and subsequently the focus of immense public and political controversy about what is taught. This public debate about the 'what' of history has reinforced an old view that history is about important

knowledge. However, rather than leaving the 'how' question unaddressed, it has been assumed to have been an innate interest in, and important topic that will motivate and engage both students and teachers.

The debates around history have been largely in relation to Australian History, or national history internationally, and the presentation of the national story in schools. The resultant 'History Wars' need to be seen, however, within the longer trend to see history in schools as being part of nation building (Clark 2006). In this context, the numerous inquiries into school history, civics and citizenship, values and even museum displays over the last twenty years, and their subsequent programs such as Discovering Democracy, Values in Australian schools, and now a National Curriculum, all take on a problematic character and a particular view of the discipline of history.

In this view, nation building is linked to knowledge with knowledge alone being seen as what is needed for a democratic population and the maintenance of democratic values. Thus, the rationales for mandatory Australian History in New South Wales through to a National Curriculum, including mandatory attention to Australian History, all have a remarkable similarity: students (read "the community") need to know about the development of 'western' democratic society and the important events of our nation's history in order to value and preserve the institutions of our society. Vaguely, within this 'belief' is an appreciation of the notion that we learn from the past, albeit ambiguously. However, the high profile involvement of politicians, most notably John Howard, Bob Carr and Kevin Rudd in debate about school history with their focus on knowledge and their claim that contemporary history pedagogy had led to history's 'dumbing down' (Clark 2006), represent its political.

Returning to the Harry Potter series, Ann Curthoys (2011) points out how throughout the series, Harry and his friends return to the past in the form of archives, old texts, newspapers and other sources, in order to understand the challenges that confront them and to determine their course of action in the present. Instructively, they don't learn by knowledge 'presented', and assumedly 'learned' in class, but rather by combining knowledge and practice in the pursuit of understanding a genuine problem or concern: history is put to the service of understanding the present. It is this historical consciousness that is the strength of history, and the basis of a disciplinary approach to its teaching.

Throughout the Harry Potter series, Rowling contrasts all that is boring in its teaching with the exciting. The boring, as implied in the quote above, is the ill-informed use of textbooks, factual teacher monologues, topic repetition (2008) and for teachers, a syllabus packed with content (2006; 2008). These problems are symptomatic of content orientated approaches to the school subject and the outcome of the politicisation of essential historical knowledge. They result in the artificial separation of curriculum and pedagogy. The reason for this is that content and the level of content knowledge are privileged in the public debate, tending to an inclination to include more than can be taught well, and subsequently feeding the cycle of student boredom and disengagement. However, as Clark (2008) found in her interviews of students and history teachers across Australia, they overwhelmingly reported enthusiasm about history when it was taught in a fashion that reflected its disciplinary roots: investigating evidence, debating perspectives and interpretations, making their own arguments, engaging in genuine discussion and making connection to their understanding of contemporary society, to name but a few features of disciplinary history..

Broadening curriculum

Balancing the public and political demands of a school subject with a genuine disciplinary engagement in a history curriculum document is an understandably difficult

task. It is not surprising then, that while the Australian Curriculum:History(AC:H, ACARA, 2012) attempts to achieve this balance, it ultimately fails.. In the Australian context,a concern for a mandatory content dominated written curriculum, has prevailed. While the AC:H has relatively few content descriptors or guides they structure the document such that the progression of learning sends a powerful message about the subject's focus. . Thus, teachers' attention is directed towards the content and its coverage,not to disciplinary based inquiry.

Yet, the rationale for the curriculum is that "History, as a discipline, has its own methods and procedures which make it different from other ways of understanding human experience" (AC:H, 2012, p.#?).Further, there is reference in its aims to those concepts that history develops; together, they suggest a disciplinary viewpoint. Thus, the rationale and aims that point to a unique disciplinary approach, and the important contribution of disciplinary historyⁱ to students' learning, are lost.

Returning, then, to broader definitions of the curriculum that encompass broad educational experience and combine curriculum and pedagogy (Pinar, 2012), will help rebalance the relationship between content and disciplinary understanding and foster genuine historical learning that engages students, enthuses teachers and satisfies public / political concerns. Therefore, I will look at some ideas of disciplinary literacies and pedagogies that combine necessary disciplinary knowledge with disciplinary ways of thinking. I take pedagogy to refer to classroom activities that teachers craft and which students engage with to develop disciplinary understandings. Thus, pedagogy is the deliberate design of learning that results in the active engagement of students. Similarly, I adopt a broad view of literacy (Cumming and Wyatt-Smith, 2001) that pays due regard to its technical aspects while sympathizing with socio-cultural and critical definitions.

Historical literacy, consciousness & thinking

While I have argued elsewhere (Roberts, 2010), that work related to concepts of Historical Literacy (Taylor & Young, 2003), Historical Consciousness (Seixas, 2006; Seixas & Peck, 2004), and Historical Thinking (Lévesque, 2008) are not themselves pedagogies, I introduce these concepts to advance my pedagogical argument. I suggest that they form the basis of a disciplinary pedagogy of history. Together, historical literacy, consciousness and thinking help to sketch the distinctive methods, approaches and dispositions of the history discipline. ..

Historical literacy

In their guide to teaching history in Australian schools, Taylor and Young (2003) outline a model of Historical Literacy (Table 1). The notion of historical literacy provides a consistent framework upon which to develop historical understanding and a common, research based language for discussing history teaching. This approach to history moves away from a focus on recalling facts to position the study of history as “a systemic process with particular sets of skills, attitudes and conceptual understandings that mediate and develop historical consciousness” (Taylor & Young, 2003, p.29).

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Events of the past | Knowing and understanding historical events, using prior knowledge, and realising the significance of different events. |
| Narratives of the past | Understanding the shape of change and continuity over time, understanding multiple narratives and dealing with open-endedness. |
| Research skills | Gathering, analysing and using the evidence (artefacts, documents and graphics) and issues of provenance. |
| The language of history | Understanding and dealing with the language of the past. |
| Historical concepts | Understanding historical concepts such as causation and motivation. |
| ICT understandings | Using, understanding and evaluating ICT-based historical resources (the virtual archive). |
| Making | Connecting the past with the self and the world today. |

| | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| connections | |
| Contention and contestability | Understanding the 'rules' and the place of public and professional historical debate. |
| Representational expression | Understanding and using creativity in representing the past through film, drama, visual arts, music, fiction, poetry and ICT. |
| Moral judgement's in history | Understanding the moral and ethical issues involved in historical explanation. |
| Applied science in history | Understanding the use and value of scientific and technological expertise and methods in investigating the past, such as DNA analysis or gas chromatography tests. |
| Historical explanation | Using historical reasoning, synthesis and interpretation (the index of historical literacy) to explain the past. Historical understanding is incomplete without explanation. |

Table 1: Model of Historical Literacy (Taylor & Young, 2003 p.33)

Historical consciousness

If developing historical consciousness were the aim of historical literacy, then *The Benchmarks of Historical Thinking* proposed by Seixas (2006) provide a useful umbrella for key concepts. According to the rationale for developing historical consciousness provided by the Canadian Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness, to think historically, students need to be able to:

- Establish *historical significance*
- Use *primary source evidence*
- Identify *continuity and change*
- Analyze *cause and consequence*
- Take *historical perspectives*, and
- Understand the *ethical dimension* of historical interpretations. (Seixas, 2006, p. ? original emphasis)

In *The Benchmarks of Historical Thinking* (Seixas, 2006), each of these is explained in terms of what is involved in each, what students at the most sophisticated level will be

able to do and suggested student tasks. This last area, suggested student tasks, starts to hint at the pedagogy of each of the six concepts, however it can also be argued that the concepts are perhaps aptitudes and skills that the study of history fosters rather than explicitly teaches. Thus while the benchmarks and their associated concepts are aimed at fostering new approaches to history teaching and student learning (Seixas, 2008) they still require a further degree of articulation.

Thinking historically

Lévesque proposes the idea of Thinking Historically (Lévesque, 2008) and argues that disciplines have their own modes of thinking and inquiry with his work exploring what these are in history (Lévesque, 2008). He suggests that thinking historically falls into two categories, Memory-History and Disciplinary-History (table 2), with Disciplinary-History being the true nature of the subject. Memory-History he argues has become the territory of much popular imagination, and political interest, and the connection between it and the role of school history in promulgating national identity clear. Placing historical thinking within this memory-disciplinary combination is an important, albeit subtle, reorientation of Seixas’ work in that it allows a dual focus on what is taught and how it is taught, rather than just the purpose of history. Significantly it articulates the dual nature of the discipline, or any discipline for that, by recognizing that knowledge and approach are inexorably linked.

| Memory □ History | Disciplinary □ History |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memory is a ‘factual’ tradition (whereas history is contestable and changeable) • Trend of factual history • Commemoration, memory, heritage • History can be known by remembering it | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical Thinking • Domain specific processes • Students use to master the concepts & knowledge of history • But, not to the standards of disciplinary experts • History can only be known by ‘doing it’ |

Table 2: Memory-History and Disciplinary-History (Lévesque, 2008)

To avoid any misunderstanding that knowledge is only facts (and thus returning to public contestability) Lévesque makes the helpful distinction between ‘first order’ substantive knowledge and ‘second order’ procedural knowledge (table 3). The resulting distinction between what history is about and how it is studied is helpful as it ensures a disciplinary knowledge approach is maintained as distinct from the domination of important facts. Lévesque unpacks this procedural knowledge to suggest that they can be explored through the procedural concepts of: historical significance; continuity & change; progress & decline; evidence; and historical empathy (Lévesque, 2008). These concepts, which are further explored and their use by students discussed in his work, are similar to those suggested by Seixas as the basis of historical consciousness. Together they are essentially the historical concepts identified in the Australian History Curriculum, and as such Lévesque’s approach suggests how these concepts can be deployed in addressing the necessary school subject knowledge with a disciplinary approach.

| Substantive Knowledge | Procedural Knowledge |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content • What history is about | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structuring, giving sense and coherence • Concepts that give shape to historical practice and thinking about the past • Concepts, not what history is about but arise in the act of doing history |

Table 3: Substantive Knowledge and procedural Knowledge in History (Lévesque, 2008)

Historical thinking in the classroom

As historical literacy, consciousness and thinking are essentially dispositions to the discipline of history that its teaching aims to foster rather than pedagogical approaches, describing what they look like in the classroom is difficult as it is ultimately subjective and dependent upon an initial understanding of the discipline. This is perhaps the biggest challenge for a disciplinary approach to history as many who find themselves leading history classrooms unfortunately have no background in the academic discipline. While

not alleviating this broad concern Bertram (2012) has developed a language, based on work in mathematics, to talk about the relationship between substantive and procedural knowledge when observing history classrooms. Conceptualised as four domains of history practice, see Table 4 below, this approach gives a language of description to explore how history classrooms foster historical thinking and consciousness. While not explicitly including pedagogical knowledge this approach further breaks down Lévesque’s construction and makes it a more accessible framework for describing history classrooms in schools rather than historical thinking more generally. Bertram (2012) argues that it is the goal of history teaching to reach the esoteric quadrant where substantive and procedural knowledge meet, and while she also recognizes that students often need to be inducted into this way of seeing the world through the public quadrant, teaching shouldn’t remain there.

| | | Procedural Knowledge | |
|--|------------------|--|---|
| | | Specialised (I+) | Generic (I-) |
| S u b s t a n t i v e K n o w l e d g e | Specialised (I+) | Esoteric (content clearly historical; language specialised, and specialised procedural knowledge that fosters historical thinking) | Expressive (content clearly historical; language specialised but generic procedural knowledge) |
| | Generic (I-) | Descriptive (content knowledge not specialised to history, perhaps located in the everyday; language unspecialised; specialised procedural knowledge that fosters historical thinking) | Public (Content knowledge not specialised to history, perhaps located in the everyday; language unspecialized; generic procedural knowledge) |

Table 4: Domains of Practice for School History (Bertram, 2012 P. 436)

When this approach was used to observe history lessons Bertram (2012) found that classrooms in the lower years of school often undertook activities that focused on ‘doing’ history without requiring the use of historical knowledge. Instead the classroom activities tended to be source based comprehension questions that did not require any historical enquiry, instead history was merely the context of comprehension (Bertram, 2012). Relating Bertram’s approach in the Australian History Curriculum it is evident that foundation to year three is perhaps more aligned to the public quadrant as students are inducted into ‘history’ in a general sense. From year four students progressively begin to work towards a more esoteric, and consequently disciplinary, approach to history. As Bertram notes (2012) teachers that are not trained in the specialisation of history quite easily, and unintentionally, deliver lessons comprising generic technical activities that are not historical. As such Bertram’s (2012) model provides a useful framework to self assess the disciplinary nature of history lessons.

Disciplinary literacy

Moving from the public to the esoteric discipline specific domain and away from the general literacy approaches observed in many history classrooms (Bertram, 2012) requires a disciplinary approach to literacy. The notion of a subject, or discipline, specific literacy has been argued for a while by various authors (Green, 1988; Cumming & Wyatt-Smith, 2001; Moje, 2008; Schleppegrell, 2011) and founded upon the recognition that a discipline is a space where knowledge is constructed and produced rather than somewhere that content resides (Moje, 2008). This perspective draws attentions to the different ways in which knowledge is produced, constructed and communicated in the different disciplines and consequently shifts the perspective of literacy from the standpoint of literacy theory to the standpoint of disciplinary learning theory (Moje, 2008). Here Cumming and Wyatt-Smith’s (2001) curriculum literacies approach of looking at what students are required to do in the classrooms of the various disciplines through the enacted curriculum is particularly useful. By taking the perspective of the student Cumming and Wyatt-Smith (2001) illustrate how each

discipline has different literacy demands and therefore they argue that a plural view of literacies and their interrelationship with the curriculum is needed.

This plural view of literacy aligns well with history as the discipline requires an understanding of the social and cultural context of the past, a critical perspective and effective communication. When it comes to using historical literacies, thinking or consciousness in the classroom as an orientation to teaching it quickly becomes apparent that a disciplinary literacy practice is an integral aspect of learning and meaning making and not simply a strategy for engaging with text. To study history effectively by engaging with the substantive and procedural knowledge of the discipline requires students to make meaning, develop interpretations based on a variety of perspectives, and use a range of evidence. Interpreting evidence and weighing up various perspectives requires a critical-cultural approach that emphasizes the influence of culture and context. Thus socio-cultural and critical literacy perspectives are particularly relevant to history, or perhaps reinforce that the historical disciplinary approach is itself a curriculum literacy, as students make personal meaning of the past while learning to live in their society and learn its culture through appreciating its history. Of course while also reinforcing the value of multiple perspectives to decode sources of evidence students must have the appropriate technical skills to read the text or image, as well as recognize the social and cultural context of the production of the evidence and its interpretation.

Importantly Green's (1998) proposed a model of subject specific literacy emphasizes that 'thinking' and 'meaning' are specific to context and culture, and that it is through the school subjects that we learn the culture. Reflecting once more the ideas of historical literacy, thinking and consciousness the emphasis on 'meaning' and 'thinking' are significant orientations to approach history from as it is through the discipline of history that students learn important cultural knowledge and acquire particular dispositions. For example a disciplinary approach to history models a democratic or critical disposition whilst also fostering the values that underpin a democratic society. According to Green (1988) it is through writing that we learn to think and make meaning, and that writing has specific characteristics relevant to the subject. Thus in relation to history writing needs to

reflect the disciplinary thinking of constructing arguments and reaching conclusions through the use of evidence, critical thinking and a detailed analysis of the context and origin of the evidence.

Disciplinary literacy as pedagogy

As Moje (2008) suggests it is more productive to design disciplinary specific programs rather than relying upon content teachers to employ literacy practices – hence the importance of recognizing the disciplinary base of school subjects as ways of thinking about and investigating the world rather than as content to transmit. However, the step from principles and theory to classroom strategies is problematic. Too often approaches are extolled by expert practitioners without the overarching theory, and as such become strategies to implement rather than ways of approaching the discipline. Similarly theories often lack the steps to facilitate classroom implementation (Roberts, 2010). While this is an area that clearly needs work in history I'll briefly outline here two examples that show how disciplinary approaches may be adopted in the history classroom.

literacy, technology and disciplined inquiry

The first is an approach that integrates literacy, technology and disciplined inquiry (Damico, Baildon & Campano, 2005) using the model of literacy developed by Green (1998). The modern classroom is an increasingly technology rich environment that can pose new challenges for teachers. However it provides a perfect opportunity for history teachers to move away from textbooks and encourage students to engage in producing history and making meaning from accessing original material. National institutions now have available an increasing array of historical material, including newspapers, television footage, photographs and other documents, that students and teachers can use in disciplinary study. Furthermore the tools students have at their disposal thanks to web 2.0 (and increasingly web 3.0) technologies, such as blogs and wiki's facilitate collaborative writing that can be put to work in meaning making and presenting evidence and interpretations.

To this end Damico et al developed, and validated, a conceptual model (Table 5) for analyzing internet material. The model resembles the traditional questions that history students are often taught to ask when considering the reliability of any source, however here they have been tweaked for a technology environment and organized around the three traditional perspectives of literacy theory. The model demonstrates quite simply how disciplinary inquiry can be informed by literacy theory, and is more useful than the separation of ICT Understanding in Taylor and Young's (2003) index of historical literacy.

| |
|---|
| 1: Operational |
| a) Identifying and sorting the components of the Web page (e.g., an initial descriptive reading of the range of texts and links contained on the site); |
| b) Locating key information on the site by scanning for headings and topic sentences; |
| c) Determining credibility of author(s) or creator(s) of site (e.g., Who are they? What are their educational, political, commercial affiliations?); and considering the intended audience; |
| d) Choosing whether to examine the site more closely or to move on to another site. |
| 2: Academic |
| a) Identifying and drawing upon relevant prior knowledge; |
| b) Evaluating claims and evidence within the site; and |
| c) Checking and cross-checking claims and evidence from other Web sites and sources to build contextualized interpretations. |
| 3: Critical |
| a) Determining perspectives included and omitted in the site; |
| b) Identifying techniques (such as loaded words, use of provocative images, links to highly reputable Web sites, etc.) that author/creator uses to try to influence readers; |

| |
|---|
| c) Considering how one's own beliefs, values, perspectives, prejudices, etc. shape one's reading. |
|---|

Table 5: Conceptual Model for analyzing internet material (Damico et al, 2005)

The 'Document-Based Lesson'

The second approach to disciplined inquiry in the classroom is that of the 'Document-Based Lesson' (Reisman, 2012). In this approach researchers developed a lesson sequence using evidence to encourage students to 'read like a historian'. The approach was based on an understanding of the disciplinary characteristics of history classrooms, such as historical thinking and historical consciousness, and an appreciation of the particular literacy skills required for students to read history. Teachers involved in the research implemented a standard lesson sequence that comprised: the establishment of background knowledge, historical inquiry with multiple documents (no more than 250 words and from a range of perspectives), and discussion. Notably the documents were modified to make the language initially more accessible for students, however it was found that as the students became more familiar with historical language the need to modify the text reduced. Furthermore the inquiry was supported by graphic organizers that structured and directed the students analysis of the different documents. Reisman found that using this approach students learning on the four measures of historical thinking, factual knowledge, general reasoning and reading comprehension all increased (2012). While such a structured approach may raise other educational questions about creativity or freedom it certainly illustrates that a deliberate pedagogy based in a disciplinary literacy understanding can have significant effects on students disciplinary learning.

Conclusion

I have suggested in this paper that a disciplinary literacy approach to the teaching of history as a school subject has the potential to reflect both the distinct approach to knowledge and understanding and the very structure of the discipline of history. As such it also has the potential to bring together the two competing demands placed upon history

as a school subject. As evident from the concepts of historical consciousness and historical thinking history is about using evidence to construct an argument, contestation between ideas, interpretation and ultimately a plurality of interpretations. While there may be important knowledge underpinning this, such as the structure of the Australian Federation or facts about European settlement, the significance and interpretation of these events have legitimately contestable interpretations. Recognizing and allowing these, while also having the request background of knowledge, makes history both politically charged and fundamental to fostering an open democracy. When we present one interpretation of history through only the transmission of knowledge we undermine the very skills that a functional democracy relies upon. Thus it's not about how many students can name the first prime minister or recite a view about Australian exceptionalism that really matters: It's about the ability to critically engage and develop the skills and historical awareness that genuine democratic participation is based upon. This ultimately is an issue of literacy, especially the disciplinary literacies of history.

While histories place in the curriculum is secure there is still uncertainty about exactly where the intended learning outcome lie (Gilbert, 2011) between procedural and substantive knowledge. Debates around which important events are included, uncertainty around how the curriculum will be assessed and reported and the distorting influence of National Literacy and Numeracy testing regimes that don't focus upon disciplinary literacies all undermine attempts at genuine disciplinary learning. Fortunately studies such as that by Bertram (2012), Reisman (2012) and Damico et al (2005) cited above illustrate that ultimately teaching that focuses upon developing a genuine understanding of the discipline makes a difference to students learning – and ultimately perhaps our society.

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¹ While I have resisted defining a distinct disciplinary characteristic, as to do so potentially contradicts the very disciplinary approach and argument of this paper, it may be helpful for those not familiar with history to refer to the rationale of the 'Australian Curriculum: History' which suggests that: 'The study of history is based on evidence derived from remains of the past. It is interpretative by nature, promotes debate and

encourages thinking about human values, including present and future challenges. The process of historical inquiry develops transferable skills, such as the ability to ask relevant questions; critically analyse and interpret sources; consider context; respect and explain different perspectives; develop and substantiate interpretations, and communicate effectively' (ACARA, 2012)