Generating Historical Argument about Causation in the History Classroom: Exploring Practical Teaching Approaches

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Abstract: How can students construct their own causal explanations, reach their own generalizations about historical change (or continuity) and establish evidence for their own enquiries? How can we teach them enough about the *discipline* of history – its practice and purpose – to enable them to challenge unwarranted or distorted claims made by others? The author used real examples of practical classroom activities in order to model interactive approaches through which various types of historical thinking can be nurtured. Participants were invited to reflect on the properties of fruitful 'enquiry questions' which can structure and drive students' thinking about any historical concept. They also considered the relationship between oral and written activities in developing students' confidence and motivation to argue with independence, rigour and commitment. A key theme of the address was ways of nurturing both knowledge *and* conceptual thinking and thus avoiding outdated dichotomies of 'content' and 'skills'.

The conditions and fruits of learning history as discipline: criticality, openness, and humility

The body of knowledge that humans call 'history' can never be fixed and unchanging. To study history is to engage in a practice and a discipline. Such study involves entering a set of conversations. These conversations are held among historians, between historians and the sources and between students engaging with both historians and sources. Such engagement takes the student of history on a gradual, difficult and necessarily disciplined

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journey. It is the journey of understanding how a disciplinary community – in this case the community of academic historians - constructs, tests and continually revises its knowledge (Counsell, 2011b).

Of course, school students cannot climb this mountain to the extent that professional historians can, nor in exactly the same way. They need plenty of time in the foothills, engaging with initial frameworks, becoming familiar with story shapes and their chronological patterns, acquiring a 'sense of period' through images. They need time to ask and pursue many questions, including the naïve questions that are inevitable and necessary at first encounter. Nonetheless, children and teenagers can acquire some sense of how knowledge about the past is constructed and tested through the interrogation of evidence. Moreover, in a century where conflict, exploitation and injustice are as prevalent as they ever were, it is vital that they do. Of the many things that powerful interest groups seek to control, knowledge of the past will always be one of them. All historical knowledge, especially that which ends up in curricula or textbooks 'is always produced by someone and ... owned, controlled and subject to change' (Edwards, 2008, p. 45). Full democracy is impossible if young people do not start to understand how stories about the past arise, why other stories are suppressed (or never find voice in the first place) and how they, too, can and must become part of the never ending story-shaping and story-questioning process that is shared historical activity. An understanding of how knowledge is constructed within particular fields of enquiry is a necessity, rather than a luxury, that education must supply.

If, by the time they are adults, young people are to be equipped to enter such conversations constructively, rationally and imaginatively, they become aware of the conditions under which valid claims about the past can be made. Conversely, they must learn to discern how the many, competing powerful groups who have an interest in the past will always try to force one version, one kind of narrative, rather than another. Without such understanding, students will always be prey to the seductive story, unable to tell the difference between the certainty of a fact and the provisionality of the stories that weave facts into particular accounts with deliberate messages (Shemilt, 2000). They will be vulnerable to the dangerous assumption that the stories they receive have ontological reality rather than being narratives crafted from selected facts.

Such narratives might be told in good faith, they might have sound relationship with the evidential record and they might be constructed

without desire to indoctrinate, but they are *constructed* stories nonetheless, for if a different question had been asked, the stories would have been told differently. Different facts might have been selected, placed in a different order or given different emphasis. Every story about the past is an answer to a question. If school history does not teach children what questions were posed in the first place, and how those questions can change and be reworked and asked afresh, then it is not inducting children into the criticality of a discipline. It is not liberating them from future myth, misinformation or indoctrination. In his research into the characteristics of young people's thinking about the past, Shemilt (1980, 2000, 2009) has repeatedly argued that an understanding of the provisionality and constructed character of historical knowledge is vital to a proper historical education. A failure to cultivate such understanding may – and frequently does – have terrifying consequences:

> ... to subscribe to populist and mythic constructions of the past is to remain trapped in the codes and culture of the street gang, to invoke persuasive and partial histories that reinforce simple truths and even simpler hatreds. (Shemilt 2000, p. 100)

This is why engagement in history as disciplined practice - as opposed to fixed, transmitted story - is fundamental to pupils' future ability to participate in and promote democracy. Without understanding history both as knowledge and as *form* of knowledge, pupils are not only prey to mistaking single versions as the only story; they are in danger of forcing monolithic stories on others. To link school history to the demands of history *as discipline*, can thus be viewed as part of the work of preparing students to embrace democratic values – values such as openness to the possibility of valid but contrasting perspectives held by others.

All this makes the professional task of teaching of history in schools an extremely demanding one. Nurturing history teachers, never mind their students, involves substantial investment in teachers' own understanding of history as discipline. Chapman sets out the distinctive properties of disciplinary history, as opposed to other types of story about the past. The discipline of history:

> ... is distinguished from other forms of interpretation of the past by the fact that historians are expected to make their assumptions, concepts and

> methods explicit, so that they can be critically assessed by an academic community of practice and to present arguments for interpretive decisions that they make. (Chapman 2011, p. 101)

This kind of openness, this readiness to test one's own as well as others' claims - would suggest that as well as distinctive intellectual or analytic abilities, historical practice requires a certain ethic, some peculiar virtues. Perhaps chief among these is humility. Wineburg (2000, p. 24) has described one effect of disciplined historical study as "humility in the face of our limited ability to know". Such humility could be said to have a social character. It is the humility of accepting that each of us who attempts to enter the conversation of historical practice, whether professional historian, teacher of history or student of history, is making just one small contribution that others must pick up, critique, build on or improve. The moment we seek to understand the past, whether through interrogating original sources, through reflecting critically on subsequent accounts or through trying to produce evidenced accounts of our own, we have always to remember that we are taking part in a continuing conversation. As in all lively and productive conversations, a precondition for our participation is confidence that our contribution will be valued, that we can play our part in re-shaping the collective, shared knowledge that a conversation produces. Yet at the same time, we must stay humble: although we contribute, speak, offer new insights, we accept that these are just small parts of a conversation that will continue and, crucially, that one day it will continue without us. This points to another dimension of humility – a temporal orientation to a future in which stories that *we* receive or construct will inevitably be recast, perhaps beyond all recognition.

This particular reflection on the experience of practising the discipline of history, that it requires humility, has direct practical import for educators exploring ways of enabling children and teenagers to enter historical conversations in classrooms. For what is it that students must learn? As well as understanding how questions can be asked of sources, how accounts of the past arise and are challenged and renewed, pupils must learn that this is always a collective practice, the practice of a disciplined community. Learning how to listen and respect, to challenge and test one another's propositions is difficult. It requires not only courtesy, self-discipline and good manners; it requires a deep understanding of what such a conversation is for. We are unlikely to motivate young people to do this if we do not

convey the critical importance of such activity to humanity's ability to live together well.

It was with these principles in mind that the particular activities presented in this keynote session were first constructed for classrooms (Counsell, 1997, 2004). Our keynote session therefore became participatory at this point. It became a conversation. Moreover, it was to be a conversation not just about history, but about history *education*, one that we could only enter by 'becoming' pupils and reflecting on what it is like to learn how to do difficult, important and exciting things. It turned into a giant - and rather ambitious - workshop. I am grateful to all the participants for engaging so willingly and constructively in the difficult activities that ensued. What follows is an account of that workshop through which I will endeavour to elaborate more of its rationale while reflecting on the significance of some of the participants' responses. These responses also teach us about the potential of the activities and how teachers might use them.

Three broad themes shaped the choice of activities, each theme giving rise to sets of possible questions about history education:

a) *Finding questions to shape students' enquiries*. How can history teachers create worthwhile, appropriate historical problems or questions within which a secondary school student can learn to argue his or her own case? What are the characteristics of such questions? How might such questions inform goals for students' historical thinking? How should reflection on the properties of such questions inform pedagogy?

b) *Student motivation*. How do we help school students to see the point of such argument, to understand its conceptual parameters, to enjoy it rather than feeling threatened by it and to stay disciplined in their interactions with one another? What kinds of activities, mini-activities, oral questions and patterns of student response can be helpful in getting students excited about enquiring, curious about a problem and determined to find the patience to work with others in building possible solutions? How can we help them to enjoy working together, looking for smaller questions to unlock the bigger ones and to keep an open mind?

c) *Historical validity*. How can we help students to understand the means by which better and worse accounts can be judged? Although students must understand the provisionality of any account, of any answer to a complex question, they must not collapse into the helplessness of relativism. The activities aim to show students that although a final,

definitive answer to a question is impossible, it is nonetheless worthwhile to take part in trying to find the best answer possible, for now.

These themes were realized through a sequence of activities addressing the second-order concept of historical causation(1). Participants experimented with different approaches to a particular causation problem – the reasons why a certain fire got out of control in London in 1666 and became known as the 'Great Fire of London'. Participants, in role as students, were led through as sequence of activities towards building and testing their own causal arguments. The goal of the session was for participants to experience the kinds of activities that school students might experience, to examine the potential of such activities for generating different types of historical thinking and to begin to theorise for themselves, as teachers, some styles, approaches and goals which might be effective in their own classrooms.

This type of causation problem has been deployed in many classroom settings (Counsell 1997, 2004; Dove 2000; Laffin 2000; Evans & Pate, 2007). Central to its efficacy is the wording of an 'enquiry question' that drives all learning by inviting reflection on its properties (Riley 2000; Byrom & Riley 2003; Counsell, 2004) and a continuous uncovering of the deeper historical issues at its core. The central 'enquiry question' posed on this occasion was 'Why did the Great Fire get out of control and destroy so much of London?'. A characteristic of such a question is that the depth of the puzzle unfolds gradually. Students invariably begin by imagining that the question is quite straightforward, that it will simply need a few facts in order to answer it satisfactorily. Gradually, as they try to answer it in different ways, they realise the profundity of the question. This particular question raises all kinds of questions about the nature of seventeenth-century English cities – and sometimes cities in general – as well as questions about the peculiarities of London. It raises questions about attitudes and beliefs, customs and practices, infrastructure and material conditions. Above all, a mystery develops: if urban fires broke out all the time, why did *this* one become 'great'? Was there something unusual about London at this time, and, if so, in what ways can be said to have led to this distinctive set of events? All this emerges from one, deceptively simply question. The workshop simulated the

(1) 'Causation' first emerged as an explicit property of history classroom practice in schools in England through the Schools Council History Project (Shemilt, 1980). It is now one of the second-order concepts specified for study by the national curriculum for history in England (QCA, 2008).

pedagogic power of such a question in a classroom and how a teacher might use it.

The following account is far from exhaustive. Nor is it intended as a detailed prescription of how to carry out such activities. For a much more detailed account of the range of options open to a history teacher and for detailed guidance on what to anticipate and how to exploit common student responses, see chapter 2 of Counsell (2004)[(2)]. What follows will illustrate the kinds of reactions and responses that participants offered on this occasion.

Any such session is not only interactive but open-ended. Just like the history teacher in a classroom, I, as presenter, was playing a part in a conversation. In such a session there must be space for the participants to respond and to take the presenter's thinking forwards, to transform it into their own knowledge and make it their own, to test out their new thinking through interaction and feed back to the presenter. The following account cannot therefore do justice to the richness of ideas and thinking that resulted but it will attempt to convey the rationale behind some of the opportunities offered, the significance (for children's historical learning) of some of the ways in which participants chose to solve the various problems and the potential of the resulting group discussions for history teachers seeking to build their own pupils' thinking and learning.

At all stages I am drawing upon a blend of different types of knowledge: my own former experience as practising history teacher who regularly used these activities in school classrooms, my experience as teacher educator observing such activities carried out by trainee teachers and supporting them reflection and evaluation, my frequent observation of and discussion with experienced teachers who use similar methods (and variations of them) and my knowledge of academic and professional literature by teachers and researchers who have explored and researched pupils' historical thinking.

The account acts as a guide to the accompanying PowerPoint slides, which are included as figures with this paper. Using these, teachers or teacher educators/trainers wishing to replicate elements of the workshop, whether for other teachers or for students, will have some idea of how these slides might be used.

(2) This workshop focused on just one second-order concept of the discipline – historical causation. For examples and discussion about another second-order concept – historical change - see Counsell (2011a).

Using classroom activities to explore forms of historical thinking and the classroom management of such thinking

Slide 1 launched the focus on causal explanation and was used to help participants crystallise the idea of causation as a type of question inviting a type of argument. A central task of the history teacher is to define the essence or nature of the arguments that they want pupils to have – both the dialogic arguments that the well-managed history classroom makes possible and the monologic arguments that individual students might advance in their own writing. 'Causation' is an umbrella label for a family of second-order concepts all of which are to do with explaining why things happened in the past and all of which are essential to the practice of the discipline of history(3). Slide 1 exemplifies common causation questions, each of which require a form of causal argument.

It is possible for the history teacher to design activity sequence that will support students' journeys towards answering those questions. When students – or indeed historians – are engaged in constructing and testing their own causal explanations through argument and counterargument, certain properties of reasoning will always be evident. Once students are engaged in these activities, the history teacher has extensive opportunity to discern these forms of reasoning taking place, especially in students' oral activities. After listening carefully to students', he or she can then intervene in students' group discussion in order to highlight aspects of this reasoning, to comment on its nature, to encourage aspects of reasoning through particular interventions or to show students how their own patterns of reasoning change when certain variables are changed.

In order to illustrate this process, I led participants in three activities through which they explored the meaning of one causation question and experimented with contrasting ways of answering it. They were asked do this in the manner of school students working in small groups in a classroom. The question was displayed to participants on Slide 2: *Why did the Great Fire destroy so much of London?* The starting tools that participants used in beginning to formulate an answer were given out in the form of a set of cards, each containing a possible cause of the Great Fire's spread (Slide 3).

(3) See the work of Shemilt and Lee (2011) for other examples of this family – namely intentional explanation and empathetic explanation. This session focused on an umbrella notion of causal explanation.

Three main activities were then successively carried out (see Slides 4, 5 and 6). The first (Slide 4) lasted about 25 minutes, the second and third (Slides 5 and 6) lasted about 10 minutes each. In Counsell (2004) I have set out a much fuller range of opportunities that each of these three activities can afford. In that publication, I have also supplied six further activities, each suggesting yet another way of arranging a set of cards, sometimes with supplementary resources.

Several issues became profitable for discussion on this occasion. These sometimes concerned the historical problem itself (whenever we were simulating the processes that students might experience in the classroom) and sometimes concerned ways of fostering such discussion (whenever we moved to a meta-level of professional discussion about the pedagogy and student learning we were experiencing). To describe what took place in the workshop is therefore a complex undertaking because our discussion always operated on two levels at once. On one level, the groups were directly attempting to construct a causal argument about why the Great Fire got out of control. They were working out ways of doing this by sharing, comparing and negotiating solutions, often in robust argument. Yet at the same time, I was using that process of simulated classroom argument in order to foster another layer of discussion, both in small groups and as a whole group. This second level of discussion was therefore a discussion carried out by professionals reflecting on potentialities for student learning. It included reflection on how we, as history teachers, might exploit such a process of classroom argument, how we might build it up, how we might use it to diagnose or remediate misconceptions, how we might use it to provide new challenge, how we might motivate students to persevere, how we might foster new curiosity and so on. We therefore moved continuously between arguing as students (engaged in historical thinking) and arguing as teachers (engaged in *professional thinking* about the implications of our own historical thinking for history pedagogy).

The first card sorting activity: relative importance continuum and "zone of relevance" (Slide 4)

In the first activity, participants were asked to do two things concurrently: to decide which cards are relevant *to the question* (as opposed

to being relevant merely *to the topic*) and to prioritise the (relevant) cards into an order of relative importance. Discussion about one of these things always influences discussion about the other, so it works best if the two processes proceed concurrently. In order to show their thinking and to support group discussion during the activity, participants were asked to work towards creating a line such as that shown in Slide 4. In other words, they had to place the card that they judged *most* critical in constructing an answer to the question next to the question card (see Slide 4), the one they judged next most critical next to that, and so on. Where the group judged that a card was not relevant *to the question,* they were asked to place it right outside the large piece of paper on which they were working. This piece of paper thus acquired an important meaning: it was to be treated as 'the zone of relevance', with 'relevance' meaning relevance *to this question*.

These structural properties of the problem soon began to emerge in each group's discussion. Participants enjoyed both advancing possible hierarchies of causes and arguing about what was and was not relevant to the question. They also enjoyed weighing up the strength of each others' efforts to do so. This activity is always effective in throwing up varied lines of causal reasoning because the types of causes are themselves varied, ranging from the actions of individuals or apparently accidental conjunctions of circumstances to deeper structural issues involving municipal infrastructure, town administration, habitual practice or ancient custom. In some cards, it is deliberately unclear whether the statement points to a surface trigger or a deeper structural factor. It may well invoke both, with one of these extremes coming to the fore depending on *how and in what context* the participant or the group makes meaning from it.

Continuous play with the cards allowed these tensions to emerge. Each group's debate with itself thus became more and more reflective. After about ten minutes of arranging and re-arranging the cards multiple times, individuals were heard saying such things as (in this instance, arguing against the view that 'houses made of wood' or 'houses close together' should be highly prioritised):

> "... but there had always been fires in London! So surely we need to look for something extraordinary that made this one get out of control. I think the incompetence of the town officials at the outset must be the overriding factor. If they had intervened earlier the spread could have halted".

To which a typical reply was:

> "...but the town officials' incompetence might not have been peculiar to *this situation*. I think the low water supplies must have been a key reason for failure to prevent rapid spread. The card says that they were *'unusually'* low".

Through such discussion, some participants found themselves thinking about the nature of the causes that they were playing with.

As always happens with this activity, a particularly fascinating debate arose concerning the card entitled, 'Someone started a fire in Pudding Lane'. The card is clearly not, on a surface reading, relevant to the *question*, only to the *topic*. The fact that a fire was *started* does not answer the question of how that fire *got out of control*. In this workshop – as normally happens with adults or with older students who have been taught well - most groups quickly decided to put the card outside the 'zone of relevance', and for very good reason. One or two groups, however, argued that it *did* deserve a place within the line of relevant causes. At first, the remaining groups were scornful of this suggestion but some changed their minds when they heard the line of argument advanced. The argument was that the *location* of Pudding Lane might be relevant to the issue of *spread*. On this line of argument, they were, indeed, on strong ground. If Pudding Lane happened to be in the midst of a density of housing, then its location could certainly be relevant to the fire's *spread*, as opposed to its *start*.

This argument convinced many participants, all of whom were now forced to think about the card in a fresh way. This fresh look at the card gave rise to fascinating discussion about the card's wording and the multiple ways of making meaning from it. In particular, could it be said to be making a *primary* point about location or is the reference to the location incidental? At this point, I invited participants to resolve the matter by re-wording the card. Could they re-word the card in such a way that we could all agree that it should come back into the zone of relevance? I did not want them to change the facts, just to re-word the way in which these facts were conveyed. This mini-activity resulted in efforts such as, 'Pudding Lane was in densely built-up area' or 'The fire began in an area of great density of housing'. This then led to discussion about how pupils might be helped, through such a journey, to realise the importance of carefully wording any statement deemed to be a cause. Such a mini-activity has many possible learning

benefits but the one I chose to tease out with the participants on this occasion was the fact that it could enable pupils to see their own power. It was an opportunity for pupils to see that in constructing a causal argument, they could strengthen their case through subtle changes in the wording of a single cause.

From experience, I knew that it is also possible for student discussion about the Pudding Lane card to go in another direction, one that can be very profitable for younger students who are still getting to grips with the idea of focusing intently on the precise problem specified by an enquiry question, rather than aimlessly gathering facts which are topic-relevant but lack question-relevance. At this point, I therefore related my experience of seeing these cards used by 9 and 10-year-olds in a primary school in England. Initially, the pupils had placed the Pudding Lane at the top of the hierarchy but not for the sensible reasons argued above, rather for irrelevant reasons (usually 'because it was where it all started'). It quickly transpired that they had placed it high in their emergent hierarchies because they had not read the question properly. They were, in fact, answering a proxy question, such as, 'Why did the fire start?' or 'Where did the fire start?' or 'How did the fire start?'. They had not dwelt on the question and reflected on the particular problem at its heart – that of *spread*.

I then related how my own learning as a professional had developed at that point. The primary school teacher that I was working with treated the pupils' misconception as a golden opportunity. She began to engage with each group, asking them about various facets of their emergent arrangements, encouraging, enthusing and supporting them. Then, just as she left each group, she remarked, casually, 'But are you sure about *that* one? The Pudding Lane one? I'd just go back and re-read the question if I were you.' I was then fascinated to observe that the Pudding Lane card gradually worked its way down the hierarchy, in almost all the groups. Most eventually concluded that it was not relevant.

In this way, this primary school teacher had shown her professional awareness that her pupils needed to *understand why* their hierarchies were faulty. To that end, she had not rushed to intervene too early: she had let them work it out. She had done this not so much because it is best to solve something on one's own – it *isn't* always best – but rather because she knew how motivating and enabling it would be for the pupils to have a sense of excited revelation when they finally understood that they had been operating with a distorted, impoverished version of the enquiry question.

Her mode of intervention certainly had this effect. There had even been whoops of excited joy when groups had reached the conclusion, for themselves, that the card (expressed in that form) was not relevant to the question at all. Sometimes one needs to get inside a problem and wrestle with it for some time before asking – or before being *motivated* to ask – whether or not one's conception of the problem is actually right. These primary school pupils were so engaged that they found it exciting to discover that they had been operating with a distracting version of the enquiry question.

In my experience of delivering in-service training using this activity, experienced history teachers are invariably intrigued by this story. This is because it relates to a perennial problem that history teachers everywhere seem to have, especially with older history students preparing for examinations, namely the problem of students losing marks because they have not 'answered the question'. The possibility of enabling students to become forensic about the properties or fulcrum of a question by means of a journey in which students are driven by curiosity, by the enjoyment of debate, by the competitive edge of wanting to create the most defensible explanation, always provokes discussion.

On this occasion, this 'relative importance continuum' activity also generated other productive discussions, all of which could be exploited by the teacher but only some of which I was able to take up. The following is a selection of issues that arose naturally in some groups. Owing to the very large numbers, 'whole-class' debate *between* the groups was not possible on this occasion, but I can nonetheless commend these issues to teachers and teacher educators as ideal foci for whole class discussion when carrying out this activity with pupils or with smaller (under thirty) groups of teachers:

Other links between causes: The urge to classify

Many participants found that they became frustrated with the insistent demand of the task – a demand I deliberately reinforced - that they should create 'a line'. Wherever I conduct this workshop, this always happens. As soon as one tries to prioritise causes, similarities between causes surface. Being forced to separate the causes has the paradoxical effect of making one want to link them up. The more one is forced to find a hierarchy, the more one wants to kick against that demand. This is a golden opportunity for a

teacher who wants her students, *later,* to classify the causes according to type or to cluster the smaller examples into larger groups – groups which perhaps better deserve the epithet 'cause' than the cards themselves.

Thus, participants soon realised that creating a line of relative importance has an interesting by-product in student motivation. It inevitably leads one to *want* to classify. If students start to moan that they want to clump and cluster the cards, this is an opportunity for the teacher to promise them that they will get the chance to classify later. When that chance finally comes (Slide 6 below) students descend on it with alacrity. This is why it is important for teachers to reflect on one activity *in relation to another*. Sometimes an activity is not just valuable in its own right; it is valuable by association and extension. It sows the seeds of motivation for a later variation by causing the students to anticipate that variation themselves. With very high-achieving students, this can be used to foster students' meta-thinking about the nature of the problem they are solving and the forms of reasoning they are adopting.

Counterfactual reasoning and the conditional tense

Participants inevitably found themselves using forms of counterfactual reasoning. This is because it is impossible to engage in a prioritisation process without saying such things as, 'If the fire fighting equipment had been better, then they *would have* ...' or 'If the town officials had intervened at the start, then they *could have*...'. I pointed out to participants that history teachers can choose to alert students to the conditional forms that they are naturally using. Teachers can then build on this in all sorts of ways, for example, by getting students to notice when they are using counterfactual reasoning and to think about *why*, or by reminding them of the value of the conditional when they come to express an argument in written form.

Whilst it did not arise on this occasion, teacher participants in these activities sometimes raise the controversies surrounding counterfactual reasoning. Ferguson (1999), for example, has edited a collection of 'virtual histories' outlining what 'might have been'. He did so in a bid to challenge what he sees as determinist views of historical causality. This is only one form of (fairly extreme) counterfactual reasoning, however. I like to think in terms of 'soft' counterfactual reasoning – the essential or natural kind of reasoning that is impossible to avoid when prioritising, and 'hard'

counterfactual reasoning, such as the imaginative alternative histories in Ferguson's book. This is not dissimilar to Megill's (2007) distinction. He writes of 'restrained' and 'exuberant' counterfactual history:

> 'The restrained counter factualist moves from known effect to hypothesised cause, the virtual historian exuberantly moves from invisible (but supposed) cause to an effect that never actually happened'. (2007, p. 153).

From concrete to abstract, preparing for more sophisticated classification

The Great Fire of London cards are carefully designed to enable a teacher to move from the particular to the general and/or from the concrete to the abstract. Starting out, the problem feels concrete and contained. It seems to be all about fire buckets, drunken officials, dodgy building and a particular baker's shop. Gradually however, through experimentation with the cards, and especially through the remaining activities (Slides 5 and 6) it becomes apparent that the problem may be a microcosm of something bigger. The deceptively concrete problem conceals interesting structural possibilities, which embrace factors of a different order from one another. Ideas such as necessary and sufficient conditions, collective/institutional actions, individual actions or collective mentalities start to come into play and the teacher gains ample opportunity to draw these issues to students' attention as they feel their own way into such definitional language.

A teacher is unlikely to develop all these issues within one lesson. Indeed, overloading students with ideas could be counterproductive. Even in this keynote session, it was easy for participants to be overwhelmed by the fertility of possibility, especially once the multiple historical and pedagogic implications of their discussions became clear. Participants' questions reflected this. Some asked how a teacher judges what to focus on and what to ignore. My answer was that this is dependent on the role that the teacher intends the activity to play within the wider, planned enquiry (especially the activities preceding and succeeding it), on the teacher's knowledge of the needs of particular students (for example a teacher might be aware of particular misconceptions which a discussion might address) and on the crucial issue of motivation. If students are loving the activity and hungry for

more, they will assimilate new ideas and enjoy developing their own; if they are tired, or lose connection with the fascinating human story, then classroom energy will swiftly be lost and learning hard to rekindle.

None of these activities will work without thoughtful teacher preparation, carefully planned interventions and in-lesson decision-making by the teacher reacting quickly to opportunities that arise. All of this means that history teachers need to think carefully about the aspects of causal reasoning they wish to prioritise. A key factor helping the teacher to decide which remarks to build on and which to let go is the role that the activity is playing in the ongoing sequence of lessons. The activity needs to be carried out as part of a journey towards *pupils' ultimate answering of the question*, perhaps through a diagram, essay or oral presentation, in perhaps two or three lessons' time (Riley, 2000). The teacher needs to know what role each activity is meant to be playing in fostering learning *en route* to that end.

The second card sorting activity: short-, medium- and long-term causes (Slide 5)

During the set-up of this activity, I deliberately created a contrast with the set-up of the previous one. I did not, however, point out this contrast as I launched the activity. I wanted them to reflect, *later*, on how the set-up had been different and on what effect this had had. With the first activity, I had taken a long time to set up the task, carefully explaining what was required. I had emphasized, repeatedly, the need for behaviors, which would foster thoughtfulness, perseverance with the problem and patience with others in their groups. I had stressed that there was no 'right answer' and that a range of possible hierarchies might be defensible. I had stressed that some hierarchies would be more historically defensible than others and that what I was looking for was an approach or process of reasoning, not a particular, fixed result. I had stressed that each group needed to reach consensus and that this would take time: they would need to establish the terms of the debate, to negotiate with one another, to listen to one another and to construct solutions through collaboration. I had stressed that when a time limit was up, each group would have to 'defend its line' to the whole room and that they would be taking part in a 'whole-class' debate about the

relative merits of each group's line. And so on. In other words, I had made a meal of it.

With this second activity, however, I simply told them what to do, pointed to Slide 5 in order to illustrate the outcome and made out that it was a very simple matter. They 'simply' had to arrange the cards temporally. Treating the box in the centre as the Great Fire, they had to place the short-term causes near to the centre and the long-term causes (features of seventeenth-century London which had been continuous states of affairs for decades or centuries) around the edge. They also had to find some medium-term causes and position these somewhere in the middle. I stressed that they were to use the whole sheet and thus to create a kind of 'time pool' (rather than a 'time line'). Although I encouraged them to create 'half-way house' categories such as 'short-medium', or 'medium-long', I suggested that they began by 'simply' separating the trends from the triggers, the preconditions from the precipitants. I told them that it was 'easy'. I told them to do it quickly. The groups obediently went about the task, completing it within a couple of minutes.

After doing the activity, I asked participants whether there had been more to argue about or less to argue about than in the previous activity. Predictably, most said 'less to argue about'. When asked why this was, they said that it was because although the activity left some room for disagreement this was at the level of minor adjustment (e.g. just how 'short' a short-term cause might be said to be). In the previous activity - the relative importance continuum required by Slide 4 – the possibilities for contrasting hierarchies were far more numerous and competing options more fundamentally opposed to one another.

I then told them that I disagreed. Whilst their reasons for stating that the previous activity was more complex were valid, I put it to them that the real reason why they had found the current activity easy was because *I had told them* that this was the case. In other words, classes of students – even when they are adults and counter-suggestible – are like mirrors. If the teacher is brisk and matter-of-fact or if the teacher de-problematises a task, students do likewise. If, by contrast, the teacher models thoughtfulness sounds fascinated, appears puzzled and warns of challenges, the students move into the task with a sense that they are on a quest which will require deep and sustained thinking.

My primary purpose was now to show the participants that the task *had* been more complex and much more open-ended than they had

supposed. My task was to show the participants that there was, indeed, a great deal to argue about and that such arguments would take us to the heart of questions and processes concerning causal explanation.

I began to do this by problematizing the wording on selected cards, inviting participants to consider how subtle shifts in wording could have made them position the cards differently. For example, the card reading, 'Town officials took no action at the start' was judged by all participants to be 'short-term' or, at most, 'short/medium-term'. Each group had placed it at or near the centre of the sheet. Asking the participants why they did this, all stated that it was an action (or lack of action) at the time of the fire and, therefore, while not quite 'precipitant' or 'trigger', it amounted to a contingent, surface development rather than a deep structural issue or temporally continuous state of affairs. Initially appearing to confirm this, I told the story of the habitually drunken mayor and related an amusing anecdote offered by the diarist Samuel Pepys concerning the mayor's incompetence. I put it to the participants, however, that the failure of the town officials could perhaps be structural and longer-term, that the incidents at the time could have been mere manifestations of this and that had this been highlighted by wording on the card, they would have put the card in a different place. We then shared ideas on the state of affairs we might have been describing had it been a structural or cultural phenomenon. I then asked participants to re-word the card in such a way as to reflect this possibility. In other words, I asked them to turn a short-term cause into a long-term cause.

We had much entertainment as we compared our efforts to word an account of this putative, complex phenomenon in a single sentence. I pointed out that as we did not have time to go to the sources, nor to establish the facts about the habitual behavior of London officials, that what participants were writing was just an *hypothesis that might be tested.* Their task was to frame an hypothesis that was historically plausible and which might, in part, explain the behavior of the town officials on this occasion. Examples included: 'Municipal infrastructure was insufficiently developed to secure rapid reaction in a crisis'; and (a quite different hypothesis), 'Seventeenth-century urban administration was corrupt and inefficient'.

The analytic power of some participants' suggestions prompted me to comment that this was an activity, which could be done with much profit by older students or those of very high ability. We briefly discussed the ways in

which our activity was now generating much opportunity both for meaningful access by much younger or 'weaker' students and for abler or older students of history.

The third card sorting activity: Classification or 'free sorting' (Slide 6)

My reasons for placing this activity after the previous two emerged from my experience as classroom practitioner as well as experience as teacher educator. The creativity that students (or trainee teachers) generally adopt, the new lines of questioning about causality, which arise and, crucially, the mood and motivation of the students are transformed if this activity is carried out *after* the previous two activities. A general point about teacher education arises from this: it well worth encouraging any group of history teachers to reflect on the way in which student response to a later activity can be transformed by prior activities in which the essence of the later activity is latent but undeveloped or even deliberately suppressed (see discussion of this above, in relation to the first activity).

Participants were invited to arrange the cards in groups, however they wanted. They could have as many groups as they liked. The resulting layout would be something like that shown in Slide 6, but participants were free to have fewer or more groups than the three shown on the slide. As session leader, I noticed, on this occasion, how participants were newly energised by the freedom fostered by this instruction. Now they could do exactly as they wanted. They swiftly discovered that they had already been thinking about this challenge, albeit often implicitly, in the previous two activities.

Participants were further motivated and guided by two interventions. I pointed out to participants that with certain groups of students I would make these interventions at the outset of the activity and with others I would introduce them in the middle of the activity. Such interventions are tools for focusing, motivating and enabling students to lift their discourse into more explicit, discursive modes. The first intervention was given approximately thus:

> 'I said you could have as many groups you like. Well, you can. But there is a catch. I would like you, please, to create a heading for each of your groups. Each heading must be no more than five words'.

I briefly discussed with participants why this apparent restriction might be enabling and transformative.

The second intervention can be summarized thus. It needed to be given in an arresting or even melodramatic manner:

> 'Your headings will be so good, so clear, so helpful, that another group, too far away from you in the room to see the layout of your cards, will be able to work out *exactly* what cards you have placed under each heading, just by hearing your headings. So, will your headings be good enough? Will they stand up when put to the test? Are you up for this challenge?'

Such interventions might have multiple pedagogic, cognitive and management purposes. My own main purpose when I use such interventions is to ensure that students' emergent arguments about possible classifications are rendered explicit. By agonizing over the detail of a single word or phrase in a heading, students are forced to refine and test their thinking. They need to ask themselves and each other, 'Does this word or phrase **really** sum up what we are judging distinctive about this group of cards?' By extension, the group is, in effect, considering:

- What is the nature of this thing we are defining here?
- What kind of phenomenon *is* this?
- How powerful is it as an analytic category *within this causal explanation*?

The classificatory possibilities are almost infinite. This gives the classroom teacher a considerable challenge. To some extent a teacher's response to students' category ideas can be planned by anticipating typical category types; but to an equal extent the teacher must think on his or her feet. For a history teacher to chair discussion about students' offerings and to manage a useful debrief of the task requires careful listening to student responses, rapid mental analysis of students' suggested categories and speedy judgment about how to use such responses in order to take the learning of the whole group forwards. Here is a summary of two sets of possible issues which can arise from the classificatory task and which teachers can exploit:

- Substantive classifications such as 'limiting technological factors';

'human action'; 'natural and climatic factors' come in many permutations. Students are quickly fascinated by both similarities and differences between their own and other groups' classifications. Sometimes these classification mask deeper questions, such as the nature of the 'object' that they are defining. Sometimes the teacher can move certain students on to such deeper questions.

- More abstract classifications, albeit often clothed in deceptively naïve language, can appear even in younger students. For example, while more historically mature students might create categories such as: 'values, practices and customs' and 'critical contingencies'; others might offer a still fruitful taxonomy such as, 'Acts of God'; 'things people did at the time'; 'stuff they didn't have'; 'stuff they didn't use'.

After we had discussed participants' efforts at classification, I pointed out that whatever headings students generate and whatever the level of sophistication of the students' thinking, their offerings provide the history teacher with a goldmine of diagnostic potential. They give the history teacher a new means of analyzing student preconceptions as well as students' substantive knowledge. This allows the teacher to make informed decisions both about how to manage the ensuing discussion and how to revise future lesson plans. The suggestions students offer give the history teacher scope to support and stretch students according to the stage they are at in this enquiry, according to the amount of work they have done previously on such exercises, according to their age and maturity or according their knowledge and understanding of the substantive or second-order issues.

Had the session been longer, I would have given participants some additional, larger envelopes containing further information about the Great Fire of London. These items range from primary sources (such as copies of contemporary woodcuts showing fire-fighting equipment, maps of the city or extracts from the diaries of Samuel Pepys) to extracts from secondary source accounts. Such packs are fascinating when introduced *at this stage*. With teachers, this often leads to discussion about the relative merits of moving pupils from the general to the particular and vice versa. One might move, for example, from the simplified particular (the initial 8 cards) to general issues (the big headings) and then right back to the minutely particular (the primary and secondary source supporting material). An alternative approach would be to *start* with the disparate and chaotic source

material – the minutely particular - and to get the students to create their own starting cards. Each of these approaches brings its own opportunities for improving students' causal reasoning or building their curiosity. Half-way houses in the latter approach are also possible. For example, pupils might be given a reduced set of information or a small collection of sources, with some boundaries clearly established but not yet articulated, and asked to create their own cards (e.g. Byrom, Counsell & Riley, 2007)(4).

Such a discussion is an ideal setting in which to introduce Slide 7: 'Do the lower order thinking for them so that they can do the higher order thinking for themselves'. This slide enshrines a principle that I always use when planning any such sequence of learning. One of the factors that had enabled us all to reach such a sophisticated level, with common terms of reference, was the deceptive simplicity of the original cards and our resulting capacity to remember them all, quite quickly. These had acted as a kind of scaffold into the more sophisticated understanding that the group had now constructed together. This is what I mean, here, by 'lower-order thinking'. Without scaffolding that lower-order work, the information 'load' on the memory becomes excessive, and many students will simply get lost. For teachers who have never thought about this, the experience of simulating the students' experience, through activities such as these, is essential. Only by experiencing these activities do teachers notice how efficiently and swiftly they assimilate the basic facts, thus enabling them to 'move about' confidently within their own knowledge and to do difficult things with it.

The role of substantive knowledge in the three card-sorting activities

These activities always create productive engagement, even among participants who know little or nothing about this particular event in 1666. They have been designed to allow almost any participant, whatever their background knowledge, to make a sensible start with some useful

(4) For an example of this approach see the enquiry, 'So far, so fast: Why did Islam spread?' in Byrom, Counsell and Riley (2007) designed to enable 11-12-year-olds to argue about the causes of the spread of Islam. This published activity sequence uses similar approaches to those used in the seminar, but involves the students in wording the cards at the outset.

suggestions. Those with more knowledge can certainly add more to the discussion (they might know *in what way* the town officials were incompetent, for example) but it is rare that anyone feels excluded by the complexity of the content. Argument by analogy is also possible – the idea of a fire spreading in a city is one that most people can engage with through logic, experience or analogous historical situations.

It is important to stress, however, that *ultimately* the question cannot be answered sensibly without much more knowledge of period and place. Ideally, a strong causal explanation should also refer to sources that could be interrogated as evidence. Once these activities have been carried out, students are motivated and have the analytic tools with which to add on layers of new, relevant knowledge, very purposefully. They know *what problem they are trying to solve* because they have spent time analysing the very nature of that problem. They can therefore set about further reading or work with sources with a much clearer sense of the point of so doing. Even on this occasion with limited time on the activities, some participants started very naturally to ask useful questions about what they *didn't* know (e.g. What kind of fire-fighting equipment was there? What did the town officials normally do when fires broke out?) and about *why* they needed to know such things if they were to reach defensible causal judgements. Thus some groups found themselves, in effect, formulating sensible next steps for what they needed to look up, research or find evidence for, not for the sake of finding information, but in order to solve precisely formulated questions arising from the structured effort to solve the causation puzzle. Students' later quests for more information will thus have an analytic and disciplinary purpose, rather than hunting for information for information's sake.(5)

Alternative approaches

Those involved in history education are engaged not only in the conversation of the practice of history but also in a conversation about how to teach it. The above approaches and their variants, all using the collaborative and rearrangement of small cards and known as 'card

(5) See Counsell (2000) for a fuller discussion of the interplay of processes or 'skills' (now more commonly referred to as 'historical thinking' or 'second-order concepts') and knowledge or content.

sorting', are very common (e.g. Hammond, 1999; Dove, 2000) in the UK and parts of Europe, and many have been adapted for use with computer technology (e.g. Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2010). Debates about how to use such approaches effectively or how to adapt them for particular learning needs or particular historical issues also abound (Evans & Pate, 2007). Without a vibrant community of history teachers and history teacher educators, reflecting upon and researching their own practice, then holding it out for others' scrutiny through workshops, conferences and publications, it is unlikely that such approaches would have gained currency or achieved their potential. The approaches live because a professional debate about them lives. If engagement with the practice of history requires the humility and openness to join a disciplinary conversation, so it seems that engagement with history education requires a readiness to find out about how numerous other history teachers have chosen to teach and a readiness to put one's own practice up for scrutiny.

Moreover, there are plenty of other, quite different ways of teaching causal reasoning to children and teenagers. Chapman's (2003) invention of Alphonse the Camel has led to a spate of variants and much debate about the role of language (e.g Woodcock, 2005) and counterfactualism (e.g. Buxton, 2010). Developing a quite different approach, a Head of history in a comprehensive school in Leeds, England, has recently drawn directly on aspects of a leading research tradition in the UK (Lee & Ashby, 2000; Lee & Shemilt, 2008) to produce a fascinating connection between building pupils' understanding of change over time and building their causal reasoning (Rogers, 2011).

The published expressions of successful practice by history teachers - even in this one aspect of causation or causal reasoning and argument - are now numerous. In the last fifteen years, history teachers in various countries have been so prolific in their output that engagement with the collective knowledge about that practice can be both bewildering and exhilarating for the newcomer to the profession. This is to be welcomed, encouraged, valued and nurtured by policy makers and academics alike. If teachers do not write about their practice, analysing it critically and uncovering it for others' scrutiny and benefit, the collective knowledge of professionals cannot move forwards. For history teaching and learning in schools to go on improving, there is perhaps only one conclusion that we can draw with complete certainty. If creative and inspiring history education practice is to put down

roots in new territory and if the difficult work of teaching history as a discipline is to result in reflective, capable, critical and knowledgeable pupils, a professional conversation must take place: history teachers must talk to each other.

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