

Developing historical understanding in a content-based history curriculum in Lebanon: Case studies from four classes

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Abstract: Our proposed paper questions the current aims and objectives of history teaching. We argue that history teaching should seek to develop students' historical understandings in addition to 'nation building'; otherwise, there is a risk of indoctrination. The core concepts in thinking historically are causation and consequences, change and continuity, interpretation, significance, and differences and similarities. By developing these, students will be more able to challenge and critique the prejudices of their sectarian groups and understand and appreciate similarities and differences amongst groups. However, the main challenge in adopting these concepts in teaching history is the resistance of those who seek to emphasize nation building and fear that students' knowledge might be compromised if the emphasis shifts to historical concepts. Hence to address the latter debate, our study will implement a short term intervention where these two different approaches to history teaching will be implemented in teaching the same two lessons. The first approach is the traditional one which focuses on content knowledge and uses some of the textbooks currently taught in Lebanon by most schools. The other approach will adopt an inquiry and skills based approach. The main objectives of this intervention are to study the attitudes towards these two different approaches considering motivation, engagement and understanding of historical concepts.

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Introduction

Many Lebanese argue that the history textbook has been used more as a tool to divide than to educate during Lebanon's times of conflicts. One of the few things that the majority of Lebanese from various spectrums of life seem to agree on is the urgency to develop a common history textbook, which will somehow unite the nation and solve the problem of confessionalism. There appears to be a conventional wisdom even amongst educationalists and intellectuals that by learning one version of history instead of the different textbooks currently taught in Lebanon, young people will somehow develop a common identity and a sense of unity and cohesion that supersedes their confessional identities. Even the Taif Accord that created the peace treaty ending the 1975-1989 civil wars stipulates in section F a unification of a history book. However, developing a curriculum for teaching controversial and emotive history in a country that is still recovering from a fierce civil war is not an easy task. Despite four attempts to develop a new history curriculum by different governments, Lebanon failed to produce a unified national history curriculum and textbooks. As a result, for the past two decades, education in Lebanon continued with an absence of national and unified history textbooks. In 2010, the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) designed a draft of a new history curriculum for grades 1-9, which is currently pending with the council of Ministers to pass as a compulsory program of study across all public schools and private institutions following the Lebanese program.

Every attempt to create a unified history curriculum in Lebanon placed a great emphasis on the content since this was considered key in promoting a unified identity. This content-based approach can be observed in the main debates and challenges that encountered the various curriculum designers who attempted to develop the curriculum. These debates focused on the content and resulted in disagreements over what to include in the textbooks, the terminologies used and the ways different Lebanese political figures would be presented. As a result, the different curricula developed since 1989 detail the content of what should be covered in these textbooks, while very little is mentioned about approaches to learning. Lyon (2007) questions this attempt by secular governments to limit historical scrutiny to national events and rituals. Any questioning becomes a 'secular blasphemy'. If we apply this debate to Lebanon we notice that there is a trend that seeks to replace 'sectarian blasphemy' by a secular one where the narrated history

becomes unquestionable and history textbooks become a 'sacred' text.

Issues

The issue according to the MEHE in teaching history lies in the argument that the identity-based conflicts amongst Lebanese is partly due to the absence of a national and common history textbook, which resulted in students studying different versions of history. Hence, to solve this problem, students would need to study and know one version of history so as to unify them.

However, a recent study, which analysed the various textbooks, revealed that the differences amongst the texts currently taught in Lebanon are too little to result in major identity disputes since most of these textbooks are written with the official exams in mind (Naylor, 2010). While textbooks can contribute to widening conflict and causing grievances such as in the case of Sri-Lanka and Kosovo (Heyneman, 2002/2003), the effect of other factors such as parents, social backgrounds, and local community are even more significant. Young people learn about history not only through textbooks but through many other mediums. For example, oral history passed through parents and the local community can be as powerful if not more powerful than the traditional and passive textbooks in shaping young people's identity. Learning such features of citizenship through didactic pedagogies results in very low motivation among secondary school students in Lebanon (Akar, 2007).

The confessional grievances passed on through students' background play a strong role in shaping the identities of young Lebanese and developing their historical memory. The traditional and passive approach to history learning does not address this social and confessional inheritance that students bring with them to the class. The contradiction between the official narrative of history and the unofficial one often results in scepticism of the official version as young people are more likely to trust sources they know personally and are emotionally attached to. Harris and Rae (2006) argue that if we want pupils to care about and appreciate history we need to ensure that we are able to identify and explicitly draw out the learning from the past to emphasise how the topic related to the pupils' own lives or to human experience more generally. History teachers deal with big ideas and issues, whether we are looking at little stories or big overviews and real

connections with the past come from recognising and engaging with this reality. Yet history is not only about the cognitive domain. Traill (2007) argues that if history deals with human behaviour, then affective and the emotional form an important part of the subject. Teachers need to address and deal with students emotions towards history which they will bring with them to the class. Researchers and practitioners have developed guidelines for making controversial and emotional discussion effective (e.g. Barton & McCully, 2007; Hess, 2002). These include, holding with emotions, providing a safe environment, allowing extreme positions to be voiced, admitting uncertainty, looking for different opinions and subtle forms of diversity within the class and finding a supportive leadership team.

Whilst history education has been increasingly perceived as a venue for citizenship education in the discussions of policy makers, this objective is challenged and debated in other countries around the world (Kinloch, 2001). In Lebanon, understandably, there is a consensus on the need to use History education as a means for nation building. The potential break-out of a new civil war continues to occupy the minds and hearts of the Lebanese. Although, education including history education can play a role in addressing some of the causes that might lead to civil war, the current approach proposed in Lebanon suffers from several gaps. The passive and indoctrination approach contradicts the concept of education in democratic countries, and has also proved to be ineffective (Shuayb, in press). Hence, in this study, we present a more engaging approach to History learning, which emphasises critical and analytical pedagogy. The following section explains the epistemological framework underpinning this approach.

Theoretical framework

History thrives on questioning, debate, and controversy. Carr (1961) defined history as a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts in an unending dialogue between the present and the past. He maintains that dialogue takes place between the societies of today and yesterday. Barton & McCully (2007) argue that if education in modern democratic societies seeks to develop reasoned citizens who are able to take part in rational discussions with those whose opinions differ from their own, then educators have the responsibility to develop critical thinking amongst students. Empirical evidence has shown that a critical pedagogy in

classrooms is associated with a range of positive outcomes including higher probability to vote in later life, support basic democratic values, take part in political discussions, follow political news in the media, be interested in the political process and have confidence in their ability to influence policy (Parker, 2003).

School History, however, attempts to avoid debate and controversy especially when it holds with it grievances which people continue to bring up in their daily life and into their conflicts. Hence, it is much easier to seek consent and avoid controversy. Teaching controversial topics can be controversial and challenging. To avoid controversy, however, is to censor learning and to put limits to students' cognitive development which is their basic and essential right. Howson (2007) argues that we need to re-examine what we are trying to achieve through school history and that if we want to equip pupils to be critically informed and rational actors in a democratic society, then we need to raise the expectations that we have for them. To engage with complexity in the present, Howson (2007) argues, pupils need to develop historical framework knowledge and understanding rather than fragmented topic knowledge or knowledge of particular narrative.

So far in our discussion of teaching history, we have only discussed issues that are common across all subjects such as critical and analytical thinking. However, how does history as a discipline differ from other subjects? Some of the objectives for teaching history are rooted in general objectives of education, namely developing an independent learner who is able to critically engage with any material and to apply learning in his/her daily life. History as a discipline has some specific processes or concepts to practice when teaching it. History education aims to develop young people's understanding of causation and consequences, change and continuity, interpretation, significance, differences and similarities and chronological understanding (cf. Cooper & Chapman, 2009; Donovan & Bransford, 2005; Lévesque, 2008). In their enquiries, almost all history books and historians attempt to address one or more of these concepts.

Through cause and consequence we identify and assess the relative importance of different factors and making explanatory links between causes and effects, considering the relationship between causal arguments, evidence and interpretations. The change and continuity concepts aim to promote young people's understanding of the nature of change and analyse the extent and pace of change and whether the change amounted to progress and if so for whom. Differences and similarities help students to understand

diversity and similarities within and amongst groups. Interpretation, allows young people to understand and appreciate the complexity of history and evidence by looking at them from different angles and perspectives. Interpretations reflect the circumstances in which they are made, the available evidence, and the intentions of those who make them (e.g. writers, archaeologists, historians and film-makers). By understanding the significance of history students are encouraged to examine the rationale and factors that shape and underpin judgements about the significance of historical events and people and how these have changed over time depending on the current value system. Chronological understanding is key to constructing historical narratives and for conducting historical analysis that addresses the other concepts such as change and consequences.

Textbooks in Lebanon address some of the above concepts, in particular causation, change and chronological understanding. However, these concepts are approached in a passive form. By passive we mean, students are expected to memorise a list of fixed causes and their consequences without participating in the analysis and development of these causes. The information is provided as absolute facts where students can neither omit nor add to them. The main objective is to memorise the 'facts'.

We argue that by developing these concepts, students will be more able to challenge and critique the prejudices of their sectarian groups and understand and appreciate similarities and differences amongst groups. Our paper reports the result of a pilot study implementing two different approaches to history teaching and studying their impacts on young students' retention of knowledge, motivation and engagement and understanding of historical concepts. The first approach is the traditional didactic one, which entails memorising the content and uses some of the textbooks currently taught in Lebanon by most schools. The other approach adopts an inquiry and skills-based approach. This pilot took place in four, grade eight classrooms in Lebanon.

Methodology

In this study, we implemented two history lessons focusing on the causes and consequences of World War One (WWI). In one of these lessons, the emphasis was on developing students' understanding of the causation

and consequences concept using inquiry-based, active, critical and analytical pedagogies. The other lesson adopted the traditional approach, and was focused on describing the causes and consequences of WWI for students to memorise.

Research questions

The main objectives of this intervention are to study the impact of these two different approaches on students' retention of knowledge, motivation and engagement and understanding of historical concepts.

More specifically our study aims to address the following questions:

1. Knowledge retention
 - Can students retain content information when engaged in non-traditional pedagogies including key concepts of history learning?
2. Transference of application
 - Can students apply the concepts they have practiced in other contexts of history learning?
3. History learning experiences
 - What kind of student engagement is observable in the two classrooms?
 - What parts of the lesson did students find enhanced and impeded their learning?
4. History learning perceptions
 - Can what we learned be used in future history lessons?
 - Can what we learned be used in other subjects?

Sample and procedures

Two private schools participated in the study, one in North Lebanon and the other in South Lebanon governorates. In each school, the lesson was given to two grade eight history education classrooms. The class that focused on the historical concepts was the experimental, while the control group continued with its traditional approaches to history learning. On average, each classroom comprised 25 students. The experimental classrooms (one in each school) participated in the following three phases of data

collection while the control only the first and third.

Phase 1 – Baseline: A 15-minute survey looked into existing practices and attitudes of learning history.

Phase 2 – Intervention: In the controlled classroom, the teacher designed his own lesson plan on World War I based on the aims and content found in the school textbook. The experimental group had a lesson plan that was designed to engage the students in the key concepts “causation” and “change” while promoting the learning of content prescribed in the history curriculum. The lessons for the control and experimental groups had the same content in terms of dates, names and events. The same classroom teacher gave both lessons. The teacher received a short briefing on the objectives of the active lesson and some tips on implementation. Following both lessons, students will complete a survey during the last ten minutes. Also, classroom observations measured the extent to which students were engaged.

Phase 3 – Post-test: Immediately following the lesson, students took a short test that measured retention of content information to see if active learning and key concepts distracted students from learning the material. The experimental group examined a case study that required the use of the concepts taught. This intended to measure the extent to which key concepts could serve as viable competencies in the Lebanese history education classrooms.

Results

Students’ attitudes towards learning history

The prevalent method for teaching history in Lebanon is lecturing in order to deliver the content prescribed in the textbooks. The most common type of learning aids are maps in addition to some visual and audio resources. The main objective for learning history is knowledge. Memorising information drives learning as this is what students are assessed on. The state official history exams which take place in grades 9 and 12 focus solely on memorisation of information and hardly include questions requiring interpretation or analysis (MEHE: <http://www.mehe.gov.lb/Templates/Internal.aspx?PostingId=119>).

In our experiment we observed and surveyed students' attitudes in four classes in total. Two of these classes were taught history using the traditional lecturing and passive approach while the remaining two classes learnt history through an inquiry-based method focusing on causation and consequences. Both lessons examined WWI. Following the lesson, students were asked what they have enjoyed the most in today's lesson. The two most common responses reported by students in the traditional lesson were: the teacher's clear explanation and learning new information. In contrast, students in the inquiry-based lesson reported enjoying a variety of activities. The most frequent responses were learning through inquiry and application; participating in the lesson; acquiring new information; learning how to explore causes and consequences; and linking and ordering different factors together.

Prior to the delivery of the history lesson, students in the four different classes were asked about their perception of the objectives behind learning history. Acquiring new information and learning about their country's history were most frequently reported. After the history lessons, students who were taught in the traditional way reported the same responses and frequencies. However, the responses of students who were taught through the inquiry-based approach changed to some extent. Although gaining new information was still the predominant answer, the frequency dropped from 35 to 29 while additional objectives for learning history were reported. These included analysing history and learning how to deal with things in the future which reflects a more complex understanding of history which was previously limited to acquiring information.

Learning achieved through the two different lessons

Students were asked to describe in an open-ended question what they have learnt in their lesson today. In the traditional classes, students reported learning new information. On the other hand, students in the inquiry-based lesson reported a range of answers, including gaining information and developing their analytical skills in finding and interpreting causes of events. Other reported responses mentioned discussions, and a deeper understanding of historical incidents, war strategies and how events develop and escalate.

From the Likert-scale questions, students in the inquiry-based lesson

were more likely to think that it is possible to have different points of views on history (86%) compared to their peers in the traditional class (77%; see Table 1). The former were also more likely to report developing analytical skills that would allow them to interpret other events. They also felt that they do not have to memorise a lot of what they have learnt.

Table 1: Students' views on what they have learnt in today's history lesson

Statements	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
It's possible to have different opinions and views regarding the causes of the breakout of the WWI	77	5	18
	86	5	10
Learning to analyse the causes of WWI in today's lesson will help me analyse other events	64	18	18
	90	5	5
Today's lesson allowed me to develop my analytical thinking skills	77	14	
	86		5
I have to memorise a lot of what I learnt in today's lesson	64		18
	50	20	30
The teacher spoke most of the time	79		16
	28.6		62

Traditional classroom Inquiry based classroom

Observations of teaching history using an inquiry-based approach

The most challenging part of this research was the implementation of the inquiry-based lesson. The research team had to choose between three options: the research team delivers the two lessons (traditional and inquiry), the history teacher teaches both lessons, and finally the history teacher teaches the traditional lesson while the other lesson is taught by the team members who are more experienced in teaching inquiry-based lessons. Each of these options had their advantages and disadvantages. Ethically, teachers may likely benefit from practicing an inquiry-based history lesson. So, we decided that the school teachers would teach both lessons and also gain

teachers' feedback on the inquiry-based lesson. However, the main limitation of this option was teachers' limited experience in teaching inquiry-based lessons, which might influence the quality of the teaching offered to students. Hence, we provided teachers with an induction session. We also considered getting teachers' feedback to be extremely important for understanding the implications of moving from a didactic to an inquiry-based approach.

Although the two participating teachers received an induction on the inquiry based approach and their role in facilitating the lesson, both of them appeared to have struggled when implementing the lesson. The lesson consisted of different processes and activities, which students were asked to solve and put together leading to the main inquiry. Hence the lesson required a great deal of involvement from the students throughout the lesson and competent facilitation skills by the teachers. However, teachers believed that students' participation requires no interference of the teacher in the learning process. As a result one of the teachers played a passive role in facilitating the lesson.

The implementation of the new approach was also undermined by teachers' perception of history as comprising true and unquestionable facts that cannot be debated. For them there was only one way to look at the causes of WWI, which were indirect and direct reasons. The inquiry based-lesson explored a range of potential causes for the break out of WWI. The title of the inquiry lesson was 'How did one bullet kill 20 million people? Interestingly, none of the teachers used this title and presented the lesson as the direct and indirect causes of WWI. One of the teachers drew a table on the classroom board and had a column for direct and indirect. She also started to introduce the causes as direct and indirect undermining the analytical process, which students were required to undertake themselves. This particular teacher appeared to have found it difficult to facilitate the discussion and resorted from time to time to lecturing.

Teachers' reflections

Interviews were carried out with the two teachers after they finished teaching the traditional and inquiry-based lessons. The main objective of the interviews was to get teachers' feedback on the experience of using an inquiry-based approach. While both teachers thought that the inquiry lesson

is more attractive, engaging and enjoyable for students, its application is quite difficult and complicated. They thought it was more time consuming than the traditional approach and, thus, preferred to continue with the latter approach due to time constraints.

“Traditional method starts with conclusions and information and ends with events and facts they need to know. Active learning, you’re giving them some details but you want them to reach a general pattern, trends, big ideas. If there isn’t time, then it is better to use the first because at least the students would leave with some facts.”

Teachers noted that the inquiry-based approach allowed students to talk more than teachers, which is a very positive thing. However, they were uncomfortable in students doing the higher-order thinking of causes and grouping probably since they were used to giving the answers and main concepts at the beginning of the lesson.

Discussion and conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to pilot the process and effect of implementing a critical and analytical pedagogy in teaching history as opposed to the traditional and didactic one dominating the current practice of history education in Lebanon. The intervention of this initial study focused on two classrooms, so we were not seeking to draw any generalisations. Our main objective was to explore students and teachers’ experience of learning and facilitating an inquiry-based approach to teaching history which focuses on analysing historical events rather than memorising them.

Students’ feedback on their learning experience emphasised our hypothesis that they will find the inquiry-based lesson more engaging. It also helped them gain a deeper understanding of events which according to them demanded less effort and time to memorise. It also helped them develop their analytical skills which they could apply in other contexts. Although students experienced only one lesson using the new approach, their perception of history teaching also began to shift from learning stories about the past to analysing historical events to improve their interpretation and understanding of the past, present and future. Rather than believing

that there is only one true version of a particular event, they become more critical in their perception of a historical event. Adopting a critical lens when examining history is crucial in Lebanon where young people inherit their historical knowledge of the war and its grievances from their families without scrutinising, critiquing or analysing these versions of history. Their inherited bias historical memory informs and shapes their attitudes and perceptions of other Lebanon groups, hence, the importance of developing students' historical understanding and critical thinking skills. By developing these, students will be more able to challenge and critique the prejudices of their sectarian groups and understand and appreciate similarities and differences amongst groups.

Regarding the application of the lesson, our small pilot highlighted the importance of extensive teacher education before introducing alternative approaches to history teaching. Teachers' skills in facilitating learning require further development, but most importantly, special attention has to be given to exploring teachers' perceptions of the objective of teaching history. If teachers continue to perceive history as memorising 'fixed and unquestionable facts', it will be difficult to move into a more complex understanding of the discipline.

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