

Design of learning activities: historical thinking and reasoning with digital sources

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Introduction

The Internet offers a rich variety of **digital historical sources**, such as images, documents, documentaries, information about heritage sites or museum objects. Such sources can be used well to allow students to investigate the past and form an image and opinion about it.

In **inquiry tasks** students can build their own historical interpretations or arguments using evidence from historical sources (Reisman, 2012; van Boxtel et al., 2021). These tasks typically have an open-ended historical question, use multiple information sources representing different perspectives on the topic, and require a process of knowledge transformation that synthesizes the information into an argumentative account (Voet, 2017, p. 9).

Historical thinking and reasoning (HTR) are core processes in inquiry-based history learning. Gestsdóttir et al. (2018) discuss what teachers can do to teach historical thinking and reasoning. Teachers can communicate learning objectives related to HTR, demonstrate HTR in their own explanation, use historical sources to support HTR, make clear that there are multiple perspectives and interpretations, provide explicit instruction on HTR strategies, and engage students in HTR by individual or group tasks or a whole class discussion.

In this guide, we explain how you can develop activities in which students investigate digital sources and engage in historical inquiry and HTR. We discuss formulating learning objectives focused on HTR; formulating a focus question; selecting digital sources; planning learning activities and scaffolding HTR.

Learning objectives focused on historical thinking and reasoning

To formulate objectives focused on historical competences, it is important to have a clear picture of what historical thinking, reasoning and argumentation entails. In the literature there are several conceptualizations. Wineburg (1991; 2001), for example, distinguished three historical thinking heuristics to evaluate historical sources: sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration. Others identified second order (e.g. Lee, 2005) or historical thinking concepts (Seixas & Morton, 2013) and related strategies, such as identifying aspects of change and continuity, historical empathy, and attributing historical significance. Wissinger and De La Paz (2015) and Monte-Sano et al. (2021) defined historical argumentation: making a case for a particular interpretation in which examples and details from historical sources are used to substantiate claims. Figure 1 presents an integrative framework defining types, components and resources of historical reasoning (van Boxtel & van Drie, 2018; van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008). Historical reasoning attempts to reach justifiable conclusions about processes of continuity and change, causes and consequences, and/or differences and similarities between historical phenomena or periods. These conclusions are developed through the analysis and critical evaluation of available historical interpretations or primary sources.

Learning objectives can focus on different types or components of reasoning or on particular historical thinking/second order concepts. For example:

- Explain the effects of war propaganda on people (causes and consequences)
- Explain with examples that the causes of popular revolts are usually a mixture of factors from the political, socio-economic and cultural-mental domains (causes and consequences)
- Use the concept of Enlightenment to explain what changed in the way punishment was administered in the early 19th century (change and continuity)

- Identify aspects of change and continuity in how vagrants were punished since the Middle ages (change and continuity)

The focus can also be on historical argumentation, including attention for the ethical dimension of history. For example, *'Formulate an ethical judgment about changes in the treatment of vagrants/homeless people using historical arguments and moral values'*. Learning goals need to be developed in relation to the focus question for the inquiry-based learning task.

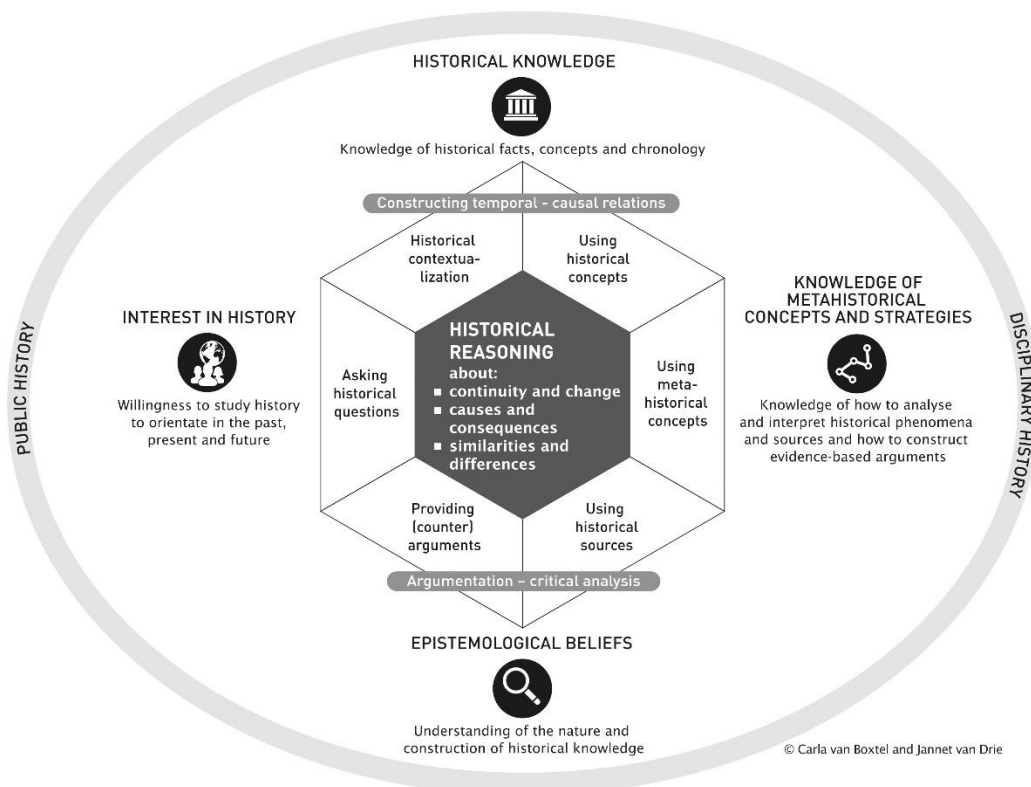


Figure 1. Types, components and resources of historical reasoning (Van Boxtel & Van Drie, 2018)

Formulating a meaningful focus question

A good inquiry question is an open-ended question that asks for a claim that is supported by evidence and reasoning. The question can focus on practicing a particular form of reasoning, such as reasoning about change and continuity or causes. For example: *'What changed in the way of punishing?'* or *'Why did peasants revolt?'* When you want to emphasize historical argumentation, you can work with an evaluative question or claim that students need to respond to. For example, *'Is propaganda another way of war?'*, *'Punishment has become more humane'* or *'Explain that throughout history, there is no such thing as 'the' vagrant or homeless person'*.

Disciplinary questions are not necessarily meaningful for students. In order to make inquiry meaningful, one can choose questions related to enduring human issues, such as justice and injustice, equality and inequality or persistent social problems such as discrimination or crime (e.g. Brush & Saye, 2014; Van Straaten et al., 2018). Other ways to motivate students are focusing on experiences of ordinary and marginalized people, connecting past and present or asking for ethical judgment so that students can develop their own opinions and ideals. For example, *'How did the authorities in the 19th and 20th century deal with vagrants/homeless people and what do you think of the measures taken?'*

Selection of digital sources

The Internet offers a wealth of historical sources. You can use digital libraries, such as HistoryLab, Europeana or GALE primary sources. There are also collections focusing on a particular type of sources, such as oral history collections (e.g. Voices of the Holocaust or IWitness). Websites of museums and archives give access to historical objects, images, documents and multimedia representations related to historical periods and themes. Furthermore, the Internet provides access to documentaries and podcasts. Especially when looking for sources that relate to a very specific topic, open access scientific articles or book chapters by specialized historians are useful. These often contain excerpts from historical documents, historical images, maps and tables.

There are several considerations when choosing appropriate sources. First, sources must provide information that really fit the focus question. Second, sources with details about concrete persons and actions support historical imagination and interest. Third, understanding historical sources requires historical contextualization. A textbook text, documentary or (self-written) summary may be helpful to provide students with background information. Fourth, one has to be aware that sources are likely to include only the perspectives of those in power. Therefore, you should always check whether the chosen sources do justice to different experiences and perspectives.

Scaffolding historical thinking and reasoning

Students only learn from inquiry-based learning activities, when they are adequately supported, tailored to what they need. Instructional support can consist of scaffolds (e.g. cues, hints, prompts, examples) which can be removed or omitted if students have enough prior knowledge or mastered a particular competency.

When designing a learning activity, appropriate scaffolds can be considered. An inquiry task can be broken down in manageable subquestions. But don't structure too much, because students need some autonomy to become or stay motivated and must have the opportunity to think for themselves about appropriate approaches. The teacher can also give explicit instruction about a historical thinking or reasoning heuristic or strategy. For example, about how to construct an explanation, criteria that can be used to attribute historical significance or how to critically evaluate the trustworthiness of sources. This can be done by modelling or using examples. When students analyse multiple sources to answer a given question, pre-writing organizers might be helpful to organize information, such as causal maps, venn diagrams or matrices. Finally, teachers can inform students about the assessment criteria, for example, criteria used to evaluate the quality of a written historical argument.

Planning learning activities

When planning learning activities, you have to consider the types of activities students will need to engage in, in order to develop the competencies and knowledge aimed at. Constructive alignment is the key to a coherent activity or lesson. Learning activities should be directly related to the learning objectives, and provide experiences that will enable students to engage in, practice, and gain feedback on progress towards those objectives. Think about a starter to introduce the focus question and learning goals, and to obtain students' attention. For example, using an image, story, or news item that raises questions, disbelief, indignation or curiosity. Also take sufficient time for closure. This can be done by a whole-class discussion in which students share their findings or arguments, or by formative assessment techniques. Both formative and summative assessment should align with learning objectives and activities.

As you plan learning activities, estimate how much time you will spend on each and take into account the time needed for explanation or discussion. A template (see the appendix) can be helpful to outline a programme for a historical reasoning activity or inquiry-based lesson.

Attachments

Template Design of learning activities – historical thinking and reasoning with digital sources

Template Design of learning activities – Example Vagrants in European history

Template Design of learning activities – Example War propaganda

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