

Historical thinking and assessment

Introduction

A new way of looking at history education, with a starting point in historical thinking competencies, also means new understandings of assessment. Four questions become important in this context:

1. What kind of knowledge are the students expected to develop?
2. How can students show this knowledge?
3. How can teachers make valid assessments of this knowledge?
4. How can assessment help to develop students' knowledge and teaching?

Question number one means that models of cognition in learning historical thinking must be defined. The second question assumes that the assessment tasks must target historical thinking competencies. The third question refers to the need to make valid inferences about students' performance. Finally, question number four explores how assessment tasks and student responses can be used to both validate teaching and guide the individual student's learning process. These four questions structure this text.

What kind of knowledge are the students supposed to develop?

Historical thinking can be understood as cognitive strategies which historians often use to interpret and make meaning of the past, i.e. to make history out of the past. Sometimes historical thinking is understood as the opposite of historical factual knowledge (often referred to as substantial knowledge), but this is an unfortunate misconception while historical factual knowledge is needed in the cognitive processes inherent to historical thinking. At the same time, historical thinking involves more than transferring factual knowledge from the teacher to the students. Rather, factual knowledge is supposed to be used as historical thinking takes place to investigate and interpret past events. Thus, to know history requires knowledge about the past. There is no singular definition of historical thinking that is universally accepted today, but there is a consensus that it comprises cognitive processes used by historians. Usual historical thinking concepts include significance, continuity and change, causes and consequences, historical empathy, and evidence. Each of these so called second order concepts contain several more specific aspects through which the past is interpreted and understood as history. Causes in history can for example be analyzed from the following aspects:

- Triggering causes and underlying conditions
- Short-term and long-term causes
- Actors and/or structures as causes
- Different kind of causes as for example economic, political, ideological and military
- Ranking causes in importance

So, when defining models of cognition about learning in historical thinking, it can be constructive to analyze what aspects of knowledge the different concepts in historical thinking contain.

How can students show their knowledge?

If teachers want students to achieve the ambitious historical thinking goals, teachers must first give the students opportunities to learn historical thinking. Only then can students be assessed for their ability to use that knowledge. How do we develop tasks that truly engage students in complex thinking? This is trickier than it sounds, as the old way of memorizing and reproducing factual knowledge no longer is valid. If, for example, the teacher lectures about the causes of the French revolution and talks about which causes were long-term as opposed to short-term, the students can memorize this. A question in the examination about categorizing long-term and the short-term causes around the French revolution, would reveal nothing more than the students' ability to remember the lecture, rather than their historical thinking competence to reason about short-term and long-term causes in history. Such an approach does not gauge whether or not they have learned to reason about long-term versus short-term causes. A valid measure of historical thinking must prompt students to engage in the same historical thinking processes which the test is designed to measure, and student answers should reflect student proficiency in these processes. This both affect the teaching and the assessment. The student must during classes be given knowledge about the cognitive processes around the historical thinking concepts, for example what short-term and long-term causes in history can be. But they also must train to use these cognitive processes on actual historical events before they are assessed. Again, if the teacher wants the students to show the cognitive ability to reason about causes in the context of the French revolution, they should have trained this ability on another historical event before. These means that the teacher now must lecture about **what** happened during the French revolution, and then the students will explain **why** it happened with the help of reasoning about causes. The historical event used for assessing a historical thinking concept should not be an event already analyzed by the teacher on an earlier occasion.

Because the historical thinking concepts are very complex constructs, it is good to assess them gradually. In a simple form the students can start to **identify** different aspects from the historical thinking concepts by multiple-choice questions.

Example 1. A multiple-choice question where the students are supposed to identify a triggering cause.

Which of the following alternatives would you classify as a **triggering** cause for the French revolution?

Bread shortage in the 1780's	
The French government's huge debt	
The enlightenment and new liberal ideas	
The rigid social structure in the old regime	

If the students are more used to work with historical thinking, and causes in history in this case, they can be assessed by constructed responses. One way is then to help them to

reason by using scaffolding. The easiest way of doing this is to give them a frame for their reasoning.

Example 2. Reason about the causes of the French revolution!

Use knowledge from the lectures and your textbook. Work on the following template.

1. Identify the historical outcome. Where are we in time and space, and what will you explain?
2. Give a background to what will happen. Here you reason about underlying conditions and long-term causes:
 - a. Economic conditions
 - b. Ideological/political conditions
 - c. Social conditions
3. Explain the outbreak of the revolution with short-term causes:
 - a. Which actors are important and what do they do?
 - b. Which are the triggering causes?
4. Summarize the reason by emphasizing and ranking the causes.

If the students are really used to reason about causes in history, they do not need the scaffolding and can write an essay from the prompt: **Reason about the causes of the French revolution!** To get here is of course the goal of a history teaching which focuses on historical thinking.

How can teachers make valid assessments of this knowledge?

To assess cognitive validity is to evaluate the relationship between 1) the kind of thinking an assessment was designed to measure, 2) the type of thinking the examination actually elicits when in the hands of test takers, 3) what kind of valid evidence the tasks produce, and 4) what the teacher really assesses as valid knowledge. If all of this is congruent, the assessment is in alignment, and this is essential. If the teacher, however, assess aspects that are not supposed to be assessed, the evaluation contains construct-irrelevant variance. Two things can counteract this. The first is to carefully plan and prepare phases one and two: what kind of thinking to elicit and how to make this possible. In the third and fourth phase **assessment aspects** can help the teacher to create/design valid assessments. Assessment aspects oblige the teacher to define and write down what she is supposed to focus when she assesses. This she must do in relation to what she wants to assess, what she has taught and what kind of knowledge the test taker can show in the examination. If we look at example one of the examinations, the multiple-choice question, scoring the task in a reliable way is easy. Including several similar questions increase the ability to draw the right conclusion about the students' knowledge. Open-ended questions, on the other hand, require the use of assessment aspects as student answers need a greater level of interpretation and the knowledge can be harder to detect. If we look at example three of the examinations, the assessment aspects could look like this:

1. To what extent are there underlying conditions in the answer? Are they explained as conditions?
2. To what extent are these explained as economic, social, or ideological?
3. To what extent are there triggering causes in the answer? Are they explained as triggering?
4. To what extent are there important agents in the answer?

If the teacher wants, she can combine these aspects of cognitive thinking with knowledge about the certain historical event the students reason about, in this case the outburst of the French revolution. This is a way to strengthen the bond between certain historical factual knowledge and the ability to think historically. The first two assessment aspects could then look like this:

5. To what extent are there underlying conditions? To what extent are these explained as economic, social, and ideological?
 - a. Is there a reason about the growing **economic** debt in France in the 1700's?
 - b. Is there a reason about the tension between the rigid **social structure** in the old regime and new spiring social classes in France in the 1700's?
 - c. Is there a reason about the **ideological/political** ideas flourishing during the Enlightenment?

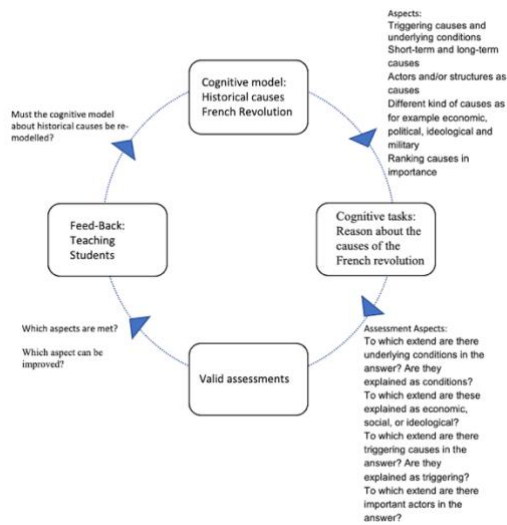
How can assessment help students to develop their knowledge and improve teaching?

Certain assessment practices can play a critical role in promoting student learning. Further, assessment can shape what happens in the classroom as teaching also tends to mirror the form and content of the assessment constructions that are used to assess the students. If we want the students to develop their historical thinking, the teacher must know what aspects of historical thinking she wants to promote, and then teach and really test these. If all this is done in a proper way the teacher can do formative assessments – in-process evaluations of students' comprehension, learning needs, and academic progress. A student essay about the causes of the French revolution for example can contain a number of underlying conditions, but fail to address the outbreak of the revolution. This could give a feedback to the student to think more about triggering causes next time she is reasoning about causes in history. This, however, presupposes alignment in the classroom. Such a classroom is defined by clear ideas of what valid knowledge in history is and how to assess this, and then really assess it by qualitative cognitive tasks.

If the assessing teacher discovers consistent misunderstandings or gaps in knowledge, there are also great opportunities to analyse and improve the teaching. If, i. e., several students have misunderstood the underlying causes of the French revolution the teacher must ask herself: What can this be due to, and how can I teach this differently next time?

A model for alignment

Aligned assessment entails that the teacher succeeds to ensure that students learn what is intended and that this knowledge is accurately assessed as is depicted in the figure below. In order to know what should be assessed a cognitive model must be created; in this case a



model that explains what historical thinking is. In the example the students are supposed to show their knowledge about historical causes as they explain the outburst of the French Revolution. The cognitive model clarifies different aspects of reasoning about causes in history: triggering causes and underlying conditions, short-term and long-term causes, agents and structures as causes, different kind of causes and the skill to rank causes in importance. When constructing cognitive tasks to enable assessing students' ability to reason about causes, one or several of these aspects should be addressed and made visible in the students' answers. In this case the students' are asked to "reason about the causes of the French Revolution". To be able to make

valid assessments it is beneficial to construct assessment aspects. These are aspects to look for when assessing the responses and they are close both to the historical content, the French Revolution, and the cognitive model they rest upon, causes in history. The assessment at its best generates information that can be used both to help the student to develop their ability, and for the teacher to develop their teaching. The guiding questions can be the following: What aspects are met in the responses? What aspects can be improved? The student will see what he/she can improve the next time he/she is expected to reason about historical causes. For the teacher the answers to these questions may be helpful developing their teaching further. If many of the students have problems with the same aspects from the cognitive model, it is reasonable to teach about these in another way the next time. It should also be considered that the cognitive model may be revised in some way. Perhaps some aspects are too hard for the students at a certain age to handle. Maybe some students reason in a way that means new aspects can be added to the model. Following the steps in the model can help to ensure both an aligned and a valid assessment.

References

- Eliasson, P., Alvé, F., Axelsson Yngvéus, C. and Rosenlund, D. (2015) 'Historical consciousness and historical thinking reflected in large-scale assessment in Sweden'. In Ercikan, K. and Seixas, P. (eds) *New Directions in Assessing Historical Thinking*. New York: Routledge, 171–82.
- Ercikan, K. and Seixas, P. (2011) 'Assessment of higher order thinking: The case of historical thinking'. In Schraw, G. and Robinson, D.R. (eds) *Assessment of Higher Order Thinking Skills*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 245–61.
- Ercikan, K. and Seixas, P. (2015) 'Issues in designing assessments of historical thinking'. *Theory into Practice*, 54 (3), 255–62.
- Peck, C. and Seixas, P. (2008) 'Benchmarks of historical thinking: First steps'. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 31 (4), 1015–38.



VanSledright, B.A. (2014) *Assessing Historical Thinking and Understanding: Innovative designs for new standards*. New York: Routledge.