

A call for different perspectives

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Abstract

This miniature offers a provocation to consider both how and why the teaching of differing perspectives in history classrooms is undertaken in different nations and the relationship this has with citizenship in liberal democracies. Drawing on some initial survey data from Australian history teachers, the authors highlight the inconsistent understanding of the concept of perspective and the pressing need to maintain a focus on different perspectives at a time when far-right conservatism seeks to establish a monovocal grand narrative that returns to a ‘history of the victors’ approach to the detriment of multicultural, democratic societies.

Keywords

historical thinking concepts, perspective, far-right conservatism, history teaching

The “history from below” (Feldman & Lawrence, 2011, p. 3) approach which emerged alongside the civil rights movements of the 1960s and second wave feminism in the 1970s in disciplinary history has slowly found its way into secondary schooling. This has worked to counter the construction of monovocal national narratives as they are “increasingly challenged from within and without” (Levesque, 2017, p. 227). This is now recognised explicitly in secondary schooling contexts,

in the expectation that in their study of history students consider differing perspectives and historical interpretations. The current focus of history curricula in most Western countries on teaching historical inquiry and historical reasoning could be expected to stimulate critical engagement with the past and open discussion of sensitive historical issues. (Savenije & Goldberg, 2019, p. 41)

This more inclusive, polyvocal approach allows students to construct a more nuanced understanding of the past, by recognising that people’s motivations for, experiences of, and interpretations of events are varied, and shaped by a wide range of contextual forces. This approach works to counter historical narratives which construct singular national identities to the exclusion of minority groups or those who reject the dominant view.

Historical enquiry and reasoning (Savenije & Goldberg, 2019, p. 41) underpin Peter Seixas’ influential “historical thinking” concepts (Seixas & Morton, 2013). Historical thinking is made possible when students undertake enquiry by engaging with “evidence”, “historical perspectives”

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and the concepts of “significance, continuity and change, and cause and consequence”, as well as “the ethical dimension” (Seixas & Morton, 2013). Seixas’ work has been hugely influential in history education, most notably in Canada, the United Kingdom, parts of the United States, and Australia (Bedford, 2023).

In the Australian context, Seixas’ historical thinking concepts are explicitly embedded within the national history curriculum ‘Aims’:

the understanding and use of the historical concepts of evidence, perspectives, interpretations and contestability, continuity and change, cause and effect, and significance ... capacity to undertake historical inquiry, including skills for questioning and research, using historical sources, historical perspectives and interpretations, and communicating a historical explanation. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2022)

While this example shows how the focus on a broader range of perspectives and interpretations from the ‘history from below’ shift in disciplinary history has been taken up in secondary contexts, the early findings of our study (Ethics Approval UniSQ H22REA172) into how the concept of perspectives is understood and taught by secondary teachers has revealed that there is no shared definition amongst history educators. Our initial findings drew on responses from an online survey which asked secondary history teachers in the Australian state of Queensland to rank both how important differing perspectives were in their teaching and how they defined and taught this concept. Of the 31 respondents, there was an even mix of public, independent and Catholic school employees. Approximately half had been teaching for 5 years or less, most came from metropolitan or regional urban centres and were in their 30s. An expanded study of other Australian states and territories is ongoing, with a view to starting both a national and international conversation about the teaching of perspectives in secondary history and its relationship to effective citizenship, particularly in settler-colonial contexts where the silencing of First Nations’ peoples was the norm in early national curricula (Bedford, 2023).

In our early findings on how teachers navigate differing perspectives in their teaching, a number of differing foci emerged: range, point of view, argument, and ideology. For teachers focused on range, they wanted to ensure students engagement with a mix of source types, including primary and secondary sources, artefacts, and sources written by people of different origins or contexts. Those teachers with a “point of view focus” were more interested in ensuring that even if the source type was the same, there was variation in the point of view conveyed. They explained this by using language like “critical, favourable, positive, negative” (Survey responses). A third group placed emphasis on how the sources might be used to construct a historical argument, linking the perspectives directly to the resultant response. This is seen in the focus on argument in the following response:

students will locate sources about the topic that ... have contesting evidence about the sub-inquiry question/key-inquiry question/hypothesis. This means the student will have to deal with the reasons as to why these sources are contesting each other, evaluate these sources accordingly and provide an explanation about why their hypothesis is still valid despite the conflicting evidence. (Survey response, Respondent 9)

Finally, some teacher responses touched on the underpinning ideologies or theoretical lenses used, particularly in historical interpretations, but this was infrequent. One example included a teacher who listed “political ideology or historians whose views differ because of when/where they are writing; their historiographical school” as an element of “different perspectives” (Survey response, Respondent 7). No respondent talked about teaching ideological or sociological concepts like revisionism, Marxism, feminism and so on as a means of identifying the historian’s approach. This does make sense, as it is not a part of the national curriculum requirements for students to identify the ideological lens through which the historian has produced their interpretations, and ideological and theoretical stance is conceptually challenging for younger learners. This also highlights a key difference between disciplinary history (in which teachers have some training, which may account for their responses which discuss theoretical lenses) and secondary history, where understanding of the historian’s ideology or theoretical lens is outside the scope of the curriculum.

There was a degree of overlap between these thematic foci in many of the responses, which only further highlights the absence of a clear and shared definition of what it is to understand and teach the concept of perspectives. Yet taken as a whole, it is clear that our respondents consider differing perspectives to be drawn from a range of source types, contain different points of view on the topic at hand, can be used to inform a historical argument, and are reflective of

different beliefs, values, or interpretations (although they don't articulate this in the same way as historians through the identification of theoretical positionality). Thus, this miniature serves as a provocation for readers to consider how historical perspectives are understood and taught by teachers in their own secondary schooling systems and what the implications of this are for both the dominant and minority cultural groups within society as the norms of liberal democracy face substantial challenges.

This call for a renewed focus on the teaching of different perspectives is timely, as the last fifteen years has seen increased efforts to silence and exclude minorities by a rising tide of far-right conservatism globally. Just a few examples highlight how widespread this effort to restore a singular, dominant cultural narrative is. In the United States, Governor of Florida Ron de Santis has overseen legislation which prevents the teaching of gender and sexuality in schools, referred to as the 'Don't Say Gay' laws (Fla. Legis., 2022). Further legislation has banned the teaching of Critical Race Theory and any negative representation of minority experiences, with De Santis suggesting that slavery had "benefits" for enslaved peoples (Planas, 2023). These efforts to silence and exclude have also found traction in Australia, with neo-Nazis in Melbourne supporting anti-trans activist Posey Parker (Yu & Hosier, 2023) and an Australian anti-Islamic gunman killing 51 worshippers in New Zealand (Garrison, 2019). This massacre was directly inspired by another anti-Islamic white supremacist attack that killed 77 in Norway 7 years prior (Smith-Spark, 2021). In Europe, the rise of far-right rhetoric underpinned some aspects of the Brexit debate and has been used to foster anti-immigration sentiment in a number of nations. In this increasingly hostile 'us vs them' landscape, it is more pressing than ever that young people engage with differing perspectives to counter these attempts to construct singular, exclusionary national narratives, and use evidence critically to make informed decisions as young citizens.

As Drerup eloquently explains,

Democratic education can be understood as the initiation into basic values, norms and practices that are conducive for the intergenerational reproduction of liberal democracies. Among the central values that are constitutive of democratic education are the acceptance of the validity of basic liberal and democratic principles and procedures (such as basic human rights, the rule of law, pluralism, division of powers). Central aims of democratic education are, among others, personal and political autonomy as the capacity and willingness to critically question one's inherited convictions and perspectives as well as the capacity to participate in public discussions in an informed and reasonable way. (2021, p. 253)

There are two threads here which need to be taken up. The first is the maintenance of liberal and democratic principles, including human rights. Thus, recognition of the human rights violations of the past, including those perpetrated by each nation's own dominant (usually colonial) cultures, is a necessary element in any national history curriculum, despite the discomfort this may cause. In the Australian context, this is reflected in the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017), which calls for voice, treaty and truth (Marshall, 2022). Secondly, developing in students a capacity for challenging their own perspectives and participating in public discussion can be achieved through the rehearsal of the skills of disciplinary history, supported by teachers motivated by a desire to promote critical citizenship (Savenije & Goldberg, 2019, p. 47). That is not to say however that all perspectives, like those of De Santis or the perpetrators of massacres, deserve a place in the discussion as valid. As Savenije and Goldberg point out, "the act of opening a topic to discussion and giving voice can itself be a double-edged sword in terms of promoting a democratic, inclusive climate, at times leading to the opposite effect" (2019, p. 58). However, when historical debate is undertaken using historical thinking concept of evidence, which includes consideration of the source's reliability (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019), it becomes easier for teachers to challenge and highlight the flaws in spurious or biased, unevicenced claims. This remains a difficult task, but a vital one, in which teachers must "make clear to students that they deserve respect as persons but that respect is not owed to statements that do not respect the rights of others, [and]... always try to address all students as agents capable of critically reflecting on their beliefs and objections" (Drerup, 2021, p. 264). It is here that Sexias' ethical dimension plays a vital role, as teachers must draw a line between discussion of contesting perspectives (e.g. Arab and Israeli interpretations of their ongoing conflict), compared to the discussion of perspectives which do not adhere to liberal democratic values of respect for others (e.g. anti-Semitic or anti-Islamic views). One simple way to do this is to challenge those students who make such statements by asking them for evidence to support their assertion. If they can do so, these sources can then be assessed by the class for reliability, where they are often found lacking. This maintains respect for the student while applying the disciplinary skills

of historical study to challenge their views, and so the discussion of perspectives, even when difficult, supports students to

acquire and cultivate a variety of epistemic, communicative and political attitudes, skills and virtues as well as associated bodies of knowledge on which democratic societies depend. These include, for example: knowledge about and interest in political issues, critical thinking skills, motivation for political engagement as well as acceptance of basic democratic values and principles (equality, tolerance, pluralism, etc.) and the ability to deal with conflict in a civil and peaceful way. (Drerup, 2021, p. 256)

As the increasing body of work on democratic education emphasises, our students need to be equipped with the skills to navigate a range of perspectives within a pluralistic, multicultural democracy (Bedford & Kerby, 2024), and the study of history is particularly well-suited to this goal, with its emphasis on the use of evidence from a range of perspectives to construct interpretation and argument. Yet it is not clear how consistently teachers do this, and what strategies they use. In closing, we pose two questions to our readers:

1. How is the concept of perspective understood and taught in your nation's secondary schooling context?
2. How might the effective teaching of different perspectives help counter the promotion of a monovocal, exclusionary national narrative by far-right extremism?

Our early work suggests that a more consistent or shared definition of what 'different perspectives' actually encompass within a secondary history context needs to be established, considering the range of source types, variation in points of view and arguments, and range of ideological positions that should be addressed. This will in turn facilitate a better understanding of how these differing perspectives might be taught and discussed with students in ways that promote the values of our liberal democracies, striking a balance between hearing from a range of perspectives while recognising some perspectives are not reflective of liberal democratic values, which most settler-colonial western nations aim to strengthen through their curriculum.

We aim to explore these questions further in our own context and hope to engage with others asking similar questions of their own history education systems.

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Review

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