

## **‘BECAUSE THEY MEASURE SUCCESS DIFFERENTLY’: BUILDING STUDENTS’ UNDERSTANDINGS OF HOW HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS ARE MADE - POSSIBILITY AND POTENTIAL**

## **‘PORQUE ELES MEDEM O SUCESSO DE MANEIRA DIFERENTE’: CONSTRUINDO OS ENTENDIMENTOS DOS ESTUDANTES SOBRE COMO SÃO FEITAS AS NARRATIVAS HISTÓRICAS - POSSIBILIDADE E POTENCIAL**

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**Abstract:** There are extensive traditions of international research focused on developing thinking in history, however, research tends often to focus on students’ historical thinking more than on their metahistorical thinking. Drawing on historical theory and on research into children’s thinking (LEE, 2001; CHAPMAN, 2009) and on teaching intervention studies (CHAPMAN, 2010, CHAPMAN, ET AL., 2012; CHAPMAN & GOLDSMITH, 2015), this paper argues for the importance of a metahistorical approach to historical learning in order to help young people develop sophisticated understandings of historical debates and controversies and in order to provide them with the intellectual tools that they will need to think critically about historiography in the academy and, perhaps, more broadly.

**Keywords:** History education; Epistemology; Historiography.

**Resumo:** Existem extensas tradições de pesquisa internacional focadas no desenvolvimento do pensamento em história. No entanto, a pesquisa tende muitas vezes a se concentrar no pensamento histórico dos estudantes mais do que em seu pensamento meta-histórico. Com base na teoria da história e na pesquisa sobre o pensamento infantil (LEE, 2001; CHAPMAN, 2009) e no ensino de estudos sobre a intervenção pedagógica (CHAPMAN, 2010, CHAPMAN, ET AL., 2012; CHAPMAN & GOLDSMITH, 2015), este artigo defende a importância de uma abordagem meta-histórica da aprendizagem histórica para ajudar os jovens a desenvolver entendimentos sofisticados de debates e controvérsias históricas e, com isso, fornecer-lhes as ferramentas intelectuais de que precisarão para pensar criticamente sobre a historiografia na academia e, talvez, de forma mais ampla.

**Palavras-chave:** Educação histórica; Epistemologia; Historiografia.

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## History Education and historical accounts

Debates about history education often focus on the content of the curriculum - on the history that children should learn. Current arguments for decolonising the curriculum, for example, often point to systematic biases in content selection and argue that fundamental changes are required to the content of the curriculum, which is often, and rightly, argued to be ‘overly narrow.’<sup>2</sup> There is no question that content is important and that these are vital concerns - it is concerning, for example, if the history curriculum in schools or in other fields of education presents selective and distorted accounts of the past - as it has recently been argued that the British government publication *Life in the UK: A guide for New Residents* does.<sup>3</sup>

A focus on substantive content alone, however, is inadequate to the purposes of history education - it is necessary but not sufficient. We need also to consider the disciplinary content of what we teach or what is often referred to as ‘second-order,’ ‘metahistorical’ or ‘procedural’ knowledge and understanding in history education literature.<sup>4</sup> The need to focus beyond the substantive has long been recognised in both school and university level curricula for history. Thus, for example, the document governing the design of history bachelors’ degrees in universities in the UK focuses as much on ‘the habits of mind or intellectual approach developed by students who have been trained as capable practising historians’ as on substantive content.<sup>5</sup> It is often the case that metahistorical reflection in history education progresses quicker than equivalent thinking in history itself (educators,

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<sup>2</sup> ATKINSON, Hannah, BARDGETT, Suzanne, BUDD, Adam, FINN, Margot, KISSANE, Christopher, QURESHI, Sadiah, SAHA, Jonathan, SIBLON, John, & SIVASUNDARAM, Sujit. *Race, Ethnicity & Equality in UK History: A Report and Resource for Change*. Royal Historical Society. London: Royal Historical Society, 2018. Available at: <https://royalhistosoc.org/racereport/>. Accessed: 28 Oct 2020, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> CHAPMAN, Arthur. LUK - Reading Re-Writings of Official History. *Public History Weekly: The International Blogjournal*, 7 (3), 2019. Available at: <https://public-history-weekly.degruyter.com/7-2019-3/luk/> Accessed: 28 Oct 2020. HOME OFFICE. *Life in the United Kingdom: A guide for new residents* (3rd edition). Norwich: The Stationary Office, 2013. TRENTMANN, Frank. Britain First: The official history of the United Kingdom according to the Home Office – a critical review. *History Journal*. 11 Sept 2020. Available at: <https://historyjournal.org.uk/2020/09/11/britain-first-the-official-history-of-the-united-kingdom-according-to-the-home-office-a-critical-review/> Accessed: 28 Oct 2020.

<sup>4</sup> CHAPMAN, Arthur. Historical Thinking / Historical Knowing: On the content of the form of history education. In COUNSELL, Christine, BURN, Katharine & CHAPMAN, Arthur (Eds.), *Masterclass in History Education: Transforming teaching and learning*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, p. 225–232. LEE, Peter, J. History education and historical literacy. In: DAVIES, Ian (Ed.). *Debates in History Teaching* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge, 2017, p. 55–65.

<sup>5</sup> QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY. *Subject Benchmark Statement: History* (3rd ed.). Southampton: Quality Assurance Agency, 2019. Available at: [https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/subject-benchmark-statements/subject-benchmark-statement-history.pdf?sfvrsn=49e2cb81\\_4](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/subject-benchmark-statements/subject-benchmark-statement-history.pdf?sfvrsn=49e2cb81_4) Accessed: 28 Oct 2020, p. 5.

after all, spend their time thinking about the nature of what is to be communicated through education). In history education, traditions of research and curriculum development have emerged in recent decades and in number of contexts internationally, that have elaborated this ‘intellectual approach’ associated with history in considerably more detail than the QAA do: through models of ‘second-order’ or metahistorical concepts associated with knowing history (to adopt the language of English researchers<sup>6</sup>); through analyses of ‘historical thinking concepts’ (to borrow the terminology of a Canadian model;<sup>7</sup> or through the elaboration of models of ‘historical reasoning’ (to use the language developed by researchers in the Netherlands.<sup>8</sup>

These approaches to disciplinary aspects of history education have tended to focus on two types of conceptual knowledge: on the one hand, knowledge of concepts that help historians and history students build knowledge and understanding of the worlds of the past - ‘substantive’ or ‘first-order’ historical concepts such as ‘peasants, generals, laws and priests’ with which past states of affairs, situations and action contexts can be modelled;<sup>9</sup> on the other, metahistorical or ‘second-order’ concepts such as ‘historical significance’, ‘evidence’, ‘continuity and change’, ‘cause and consequence’ and ‘historical empathy.’<sup>10</sup> Lists of concepts differ in different contexts - the notion of ‘accounts’<sup>11</sup> or ‘interpretations’<sup>12</sup> is found in the English and not the Canadian or American context,<sup>13</sup> for example, and the

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<sup>6</sup> LEE, Peter, J. Putting principles into practice: Understanding history. In Bransford, M., Suzanne & Donovan, John, D. (Eds.), *How Students Learn: History in the Classroom*. Washington: National Academies Press, 2005, p. 31–77.

<sup>7</sup> LÉVESQUE, Stéphane. *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. SEIXAS, Peter, & MORTON, Tom. *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts*. Toronto: Nelson Education Ltd., 2013.

<sup>8</sup> VAN BOXTEL, Carla, & VAN DRIE, Jannet. Historical Reasoning: Conceptualizations and Educational Applications. In: Metzger, Scott, Alan, & Harris, Lauren, McArthur (Eds.). *The Wiley International Handbook of History Teaching and Learning*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2018, p.149–176. VAN DRIE, Jannet & VAN BOXTEL, Carla. Historical Reasoning: Towards a Framework for Analyzing Students’ Reasoning about the Past. *Educational Psychology Review*, 20(2), 2008, p.87–110. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-007-9056-1>.

<sup>9</sup> CARRETERO, Mario, & LEE, Peter, J. Learning Historical Concepts. In: SAWYER, R. Keith. (Ed.). *The Cambridge Handbook of The Learning Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 587–604, p. 588.

<sup>10</sup> LÉVESQUE, Stéphane. *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the Twenty-First Century*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> LEE, Peter, J. ‘A lot of guess work goes on’: Children’s understanding of historical accounts. *Teaching History*, 92, p. 29–35, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> CHAPMAN, Arthur, Historical Interpretations. In DAVIES, Ian (Ed.), *Debates in History Teaching* (2nd ed.). Routledge, 2017, p. 100–112.

<sup>13</sup> SEIXAS, Peter. Translation and its discontents: Key concepts in English and German history education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 48(4), 427–439, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2015.1101618>.

Canadian focus on taking an ‘ethical perspective’ when thinking about the past<sup>14</sup> is often perceived as extrinsic to the proper aims of history education in England.<sup>15</sup>

This paper focuses on the concept ‘accounts’ – largely synonymous with ‘interpretations’ – and argues that it is a vital concept in equipping history education with a conceptual apparatus to enable competing histories to be discussed comparatively in a constructive manner. An ‘account’ is a representation of events, people, developments or states of affairs in the past. Accounts differ from what are called primary sources in that accounts are deliberately constructed to represent the past. Examples of accounts might include history books but would also include representations of the past found in a range of media, such as historical paintings, comic books, feature films or documentaries. A focus on accounts is fundamental to historical learning – as, for example, Shemilt<sup>16</sup> has argued – because historical knowledge is constructed in and through accounts. Histories are texts and it is in these texts that claims about the past are made, explained, justified and debated.

### **Naïve historical thinking in public history and history education**

Public discussions of the past, history and memory often take quite naïve forms. Taking down or replacing statues, for example, has recently been discussed as if the statues were themselves history, rather than representations of the past constructed and erected at a particular time for particular purposes;<sup>17</sup> and the notion of ‘rewriting history’ is often presented as a betrayal of something that is in principle fixed and that should remain so, rather than something whose nature it is to change and be rewritten, over-written and unwritten. Politicians and public figures often elide distinctions between *res gestae* (the past) and *historia rerum gestarum* (accounts and representations of the past), as the current British Prime Minister did in a tweet in June 2020, in response to Black Lives Matter’s

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<sup>14</sup> SEIXAS, Peter, & MORTON, Tom. *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts*. Toronto: Nelson Education Ltd., 2013.

<sup>15</sup> FORDHAM, Michael. Ethics and History Education. *Clio et Cetera*, 2020, June 20. Available at: <https://clioetcetera.com/2020/06/20/ethics-and-history-education/>. Accessed: 28 oct. 2020.

<sup>16</sup> SHEMILT, Denis. What Are Second-Order Concepts? And Why Do They Hurt? Unpublished conference paper, *Developing Historical Understanding*, Goethe Institute, Fulbright Centre & CCMC, Ledra Palace Buffer Zone, Nicosia, 22 Oct, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> EVANS, Richard, J. (2020). The history wars. *New Statesman*, 17 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.newstatesman.com/international/2020/06/history-wars>. Accessed: 28 oct. 2020. OLUSOGA, David. The toppling of Edward Colston’s statue is not an attack on history. It is history. *The Guardian*, 8 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/08/edward-colston-statue-history-slave-trader-bristol-protest>. Accessed: 28 oct. 2020.

campaign to remove statues of British slave traders and slave owners from public places in Bristol, Edinburgh, London and elsewhere:

‘We cannot now try to edit or censor our past,’ he said. ‘We cannot pretend to have a different history. The statues in our cities and towns were put up by previous generations. They had different perspectives, different understandings of right and wrong. But those statues teach us about our past, with all its faults. To tear them down would be to lie about our history, and impoverish the education of generations to come.’<sup>18</sup>

As Mandler has pointed out, statements such as these confuse the events of the historical past - which is not something that we can responsibly invent or delete at will - with past interpretations of the historical past, which by their very nature are changeable and constantly under revision:

Wasn’t taking down a statue ‘revising’ history? Of course it was! So was putting it up in the first place. History is being revised and multiplied and over-written every day, and long may it be so.<sup>19</sup>

Cognate common-sensical confusions of basic metahistorical concepts are often apparent in young people’s understandings of history, a number of researchers have suggested<sup>20</sup> – a finding which is, of course, unsurprising, as Lee has noted, since common sense ideas often reflect epistemologies that work well enough in everyday life. The findings of Project CHATA (Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches) and related studies about children’s ideas on accounts suggest that children often think of the past as fixed and as only happening in one way and they often think of history as a practice that aims to create definitive accounts that truthfully mirror this fixed past.<sup>21</sup> On this model, historians are

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<sup>18</sup> WALKER, Peter, TOPPING, Alexandra & MORRIS, Steven. Boris Johnson says removing statues is ‘to lie about our history.’ *The Guardian*, 12 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jun/12/boris-johnson-says-removing-statues-is-to-lie-about-our-history-george-floyd> Accessed: 28 oct. 2020.

<sup>19</sup> MANDLER, Peter. Why Boris Johnson mustn’t rewrite British history. *Times Educational Supplement*. 23 Sept 2020. Available at: <https://www.tes.com/news/why-boris-johnson-mustnt-rewrite-british-history> Accessed: 28 oct. 2020.

<sup>20</sup> CHAPMAN, Arthur. *Towards an Interpretations Heuristic: A case study exploration of 16-19-year-old students’ ideas about explaining variations in historical accounts* (EdD Thesis). Institute of Education, University of London, London, 2009. LEE, Peter, J. History education and historical literacy. In: DAVIES, Ian (Ed.). *Debates in History Teaching* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge, 2017, p. 55–65. MARTENS, Matthias. Reconstructing Historical Understanding: How Students Deal with Historical Accounts. In: MARTENS, Matthias, HARTMANN, Ulrike; SAUER, Michael & HASSELHORN, Marcus (Eds.). *Interpersonal Understanding in Historical Context*. Sense Publishers, 2009, p. 115–136.

<sup>21</sup> CERCADILLO, Lis; CHAPMAN, Arthur & LEE, Peter. Organizing the Past: Historical Accounts, Significance and Unknown Ontologies. In: CARRETERO, M., BERGER, S., GREVER, M. (eds). *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-52908-4\\_28](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-52908-4_28). CHAPMAN, Arthur. Understanding historical knowing: Evidence and accounts. In PERIKLEOUS, Lukas & SHELILT, Denis (Eds.), *The Future of the Past*. Association for Historical Dialogue and Research, 2011, p.169–214. Available at:

understood as passive in their relation to the past, which they seek merely to mirror as it 'was,' rather than as active in account construction, a process that involves historians in creative intellectual innovation in research, in questioning, in inference and in argument. If one approaches the representation of the past in naïve objectivist ways, one faces problems when encountering differing representations of the past in the present. If students think that - properly constructed - historical accounts and representations of the past should aim to be single, definitive and final, then they may come to misperceive the existence of multiple and changing accounts of the past as indicative of dysfunction and deformation, and to misperceive the existence of histories, plural, as a matter of distortion, bias and the abuse of history. The outcome of such a framework of assumptions can result in an understanding of history in which variation in historical representation is simply a function of 'bias' and 'distortion' – as in the case below where a 18-year-old student sets out to explain variation in two accounts of Britain's record during the Holocaust. Such a position can tend to evacuate epistemic warrant from history and reduce historical accounts to mere expressions of opinion.

It is quite possible to have two differing accounts as much of the evidence is likely to be influenced by subjective opinion and subsequently to some degree biased interpretations. Much of the historical evidence is likely to be primary accounts and slightly left/right bias depending on the political leaning of the individual. This problem is accentuated further in secondary evidence as not only is it subject to the original bias it is now also subject to the historian's bias. Due to the retrospective nature it is not possible to prove or disprove events 100% and it is very easy to manipulate them...<sup>22</sup>

Both naïve realism, which assumes that histories should mirror a fixed past, and naïve subjectivism, which assumes that histories simply reflect the prejudices and biases of their authors, are barriers to progression in the understanding of history, and for various reasons. Naïve realism's assumptions cannot withstand an encounter with salient facts about how historical knowledge is constructed, as discussed, for example, in Ginzburg, Megill and

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[https://issuu.com/ahdr/docs/low\\_ahdr\\_volume\\_a5\\_en](https://issuu.com/ahdr/docs/low_ahdr_volume_a5_en) Accessed: 28 Oct 2020. LEE, Peter, J. History in an Information Culture. *History Education Research Journal*, 1(2), 26–43, 2001. <https://doi.org/info:doi/10.18546/HERJ.01.2.05>. LEE, Peter, J. & SHEMILT, Denis. 'I just wish we could go back in the past and find out what really happened': Progression in understanding about historical accounts. *Teaching History*, 117, 25–31, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> CHAPMAN, Arthur. *Towards an Interpretations Heuristic: A case study exploration of 16-19-year-old students' ideas about explaining variations in historical accounts* (EdD Thesis). Institute of Education, University of London, London, 2009, p. 111.

Paul.<sup>23</sup> The past is past and cannot be studied directly. Because it is past and no longer exists it is not possible to conduct the standard ‘correspondence’ checks between claims about an object and the object itself that common-sensical notions of truth as correspondence suggest we should perform. Although the traces of the past exist in the present - in the form of relics and reports and in the form of effects that continue to unfold - the past itself has ideality and not actuality. In other words, it exists in the present only in the form of representations or models of what once was.<sup>24</sup> Understanding how knowledge of the past is constructed, then, challenges naïve preconceptions about what historical knowledge and knowing are. Many more problems arise in relation the ‘fixed’ past posited by ‘ontological realism.’<sup>25</sup> As Danto has argued, the meaning of what happened in the past is shaped by the continuing unfolding of events afterwards and it is thus subject to change rather than fixed.<sup>26</sup> In addition, since the historical past exists in history books and is a product of processes of historical enquiry and claim-making rather than a natural given, we should expect it to alter as enquiry progresses.<sup>27</sup> The history of historiography is, in many senses, a story about the evolution of new questions and new methodologies of investigation which have a number of effects - ranging from the constant reinterpretation of archives, on the one hand, to the constitution of new archives as new techniques enable new sources of data to be identified, on the other. We can observe these processes in many areas of history, such as in the history of the interpretation of archaeological sites like Stonehenge whose stones have continued to yield new insights as new techniques to interrogate their origin and working have developed, and whose wider landscape became a new object of interrogation with the development of aerial photography during World War I.<sup>28</sup> As Mandel Creighton argued over a hundred years ago,

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<sup>23</sup> GINZBURG, Carlo. *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992. GINZBURG, Carlo. *Threads and Traces: True, false, fictive*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. MEGILL, Allan. *Historical Knowledge / Historical Error: A contemporary guide to practice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. PAUL, Herman. *Key Issues in Historical Theory*. London and New York: Routledge, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> COLLINGWOOD, Robin. G. *The Idea of History*. Revised edition with Lectures 1926-1928 (VAN DER DUSSEN, W. Jan, Ed.). Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 364.

<sup>25</sup> KLEINBERG, Ethan. *Haunting History: For a deconstructive approach to the past*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017, p. 45.

<sup>26</sup> DANTO, Arthur. C. *Narration and knowledge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> ALDRIDGE, David. The Logical Priority of the Question: R. G. Collingwood, Philosophical Hermeneutics and Enquiry-Based Learning. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 47(1), 71–85, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2012.00873.x>. COLLINGWOOD, Robin. G. *The Idea of History*. Revised edition with Lectures 1926-1928 (VAN DER DUSSEN, W. Jan, Ed.). Oxford University Press, 1994. GOLDSTEIN, Leon, J. *Historical Knowing*. Austin and London: The University of Texas Press, 1976.

<sup>28</sup> CHIPPENDALE, Christopher. *Stonehenge Complete* (3rd ed.). London: Thames and Hudson, 2004.

[The] continual increase of curiosity, [the] widening of interest introduces a succession of new subjects for historical research. Documents once discarded as unimportant are found to yield information as to the silent growth of tendencies which gradually became influential... history deals with a subject which is constantly varying in itself and which is regarded by each succeeding generation from a different point of view.<sup>29</sup>

The challenges posed for naïve subjectivism by acquaintance with real historical practice are equally clear. It is true, as students such as the case cited earlier argue, that historians are subjects and prone - like all human subjects - to subjectivism and to a range of other intellectual vices.<sup>30</sup> However - as episodes like the Irving-Lipstadt libel case demonstrate - historians are not free to simply say what they want to say and to manipulate or ignore documents.<sup>31</sup> Historians work in inter-personal academic communities of practice and the claims that they advance through their papers and books are subject to inter-personal controls such as peer review.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, putting questions of subjectivity to one side, all historians have to have methodologies and make choices about how to conduct their studies,<sup>33</sup> a fact from which it follows that there are always questions that peers and readers can ask about *how* histories *have been made* that give scope for the rational appraisal and evaluation of these histories.<sup>34</sup>

Although there is good evidence to suggest that many young people and history novices think in naïve objectivist or naïve subjectivist ways about historical knowledge construction, it is worth noting that studies have shown that young people are capable of thinking in much more sophisticated ways. CHATA researchers, for example, were able to find evidence of complex thinking about historical accounts and concluded that some younger 'students recognized that accounts could be constructed to answer different questions, and... on different timescales' and that 'this made a difference to what each could say about 'the same' event.'<sup>35</sup> The following, from an interview with a 17-year-old student, contrasts with the example from an 18-year-old cited earlier, demonstrating an openness to

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<sup>29</sup> CREIGHTON, Mandell. Introductory Note. In Ward, A.W., Prothero, G.W. and Leathes, Stanley (Eds.). *The Cambridge Modern History*, Volume 1: The Renaissance (Vol. 1, pp. 1–6). Cambridge University Press, p.1-6, 1902, pp. 4–5.

<sup>30</sup> BANAJI, Mahzarin, R., & GREENWALD, Anthony. G. *Blind Spot: Hidden biases of Good People*. New York: Bantam Books, 2016. KAHNEMAN, Daniel. *Thinking Fast and Slow*. London and New York: Penguin Books, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> EVANS, Richard, J. *Lying About Hitler. History, Holocaust and the David Irving Trial*. New York: Basic Books, 2001.

<sup>32</sup> EVANS, Richard, J. *In Defence of History*. Cambridge: Granta Books, 1997. MEGILL, Allan. *Historical Knowledge / Historical Error: A contemporary guide to practice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> GUNN, Simon, & FAIRE, Lucy. *Research Methods for History*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> MCCULLAGH, C. Behan. *Justifying Historical Descriptions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

<sup>35</sup> LEE, Peter, J. History in an Information Culture. *History Education Research Journal*, 1(2), 26–43, 2001. <https://doi.org/info:doi/10.18546/HERJ.01.2.05>, p. 36.



the idea that differences in interpretation are both legitimate and natural and that historians can be active in making sense of the past without 'bias' or subjective distortion arising.

Historians have access to different sources. Sources differ and it depends on where they take their information from and how many sources, they take their information from as to the different views they have. And it also depends on the way they have thought about the topic before they started studying it. Because if they already have an idea or a view on something then the way they interpreted the sources would be different. And people don't interpret sources in the same way and so they pull out different ideas from the sources... Some people might read into something more than others and some people take things at face value whereas others will like 'read between the lines' and take out ideas that aren't explicit in the writing.<sup>36</sup>

Cognitive psychological research points to the importance of attending to learners' misconceptions and preconceptions if we wish to move their thinking on. If we do not do this, it is likely that they will misapprehend what they are taught or, if they do make some progress as a result of teaching, that they will revert to prior understandings and misunderstandings rapidly.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, there is good reason to think that teaching that sets out to challenge misconceptions, change assumptions and build conceptual toolkits can have beneficial effects.<sup>38</sup> In the remainder of this paper I will focus on evidence arising from educational interventions that aimed to identify and develop students' assumptions about historical accounts and how they are constructed, in order to scope possibilities for conceptual change in students' ideas about accounts and in students' understandings of what historians do more broadly.

### **Developing metahistorical thinking: evidence from The History Virtual Academy Project**

In a number of occasions since 2005, in collaboration with historians and history teachers, I developed teaching interventions that aimed to enhance 16-19-year-old students'

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<sup>36</sup> CHAPMAN, Arthur. *Towards an Interpretations Heuristic: A case study exploration of 16-19-year-old students' ideas about explaining variations in historical accounts* (EdD Thesis). Institute of Education, University of London, London, 2009, pp. 169–170.

<sup>37</sup> DONOVAN, M. Suzanne, & BRANSFORD, John. D. (Eds.). *How Students Learn: History in the Classroom*. Washington: National Academies Press, 2005. E-book. <https://doi.org/10.17226/11100> Accessed: 28 oct. 2020, pp. 1–27.

<sup>38</sup> STOEL, Gerhard. L. *Teaching Towards Historical Expertise: Developing students' ability to reason causally in history* (PhD Thesis). Research Institute of Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 2017. Available at: <https://dare.uva.nl/search?field1=dai;value1=40633899X;docsPerPage=1;startDoc=5> Accessed: 28 oct. 2020.

understandings of how history works.<sup>39</sup> In all cases, these interventions have brought students into virtual contact with academic historians and most of these interventions have explicitly aimed to build students' understanding of historical accounts and of factors shaping variation in historical accounts. All of these interventions were able to provide support for the claim that interactions with academic historians and their writing had positive impacts on the students' understandings of how history works. I will illustrate this, drawing on three examples from 2008, 2009 and 2011. The data presented here is selected from wider data sets that have been analysed elsewhere,<sup>40</sup> however, the data is analysed in new ways here, for the purposes of this paper, and this paper brings elements of these three data sets together comparatively for the first time.

All three of the interventions discussed below were part of The History Virtual Academy Project.<sup>41</sup> In all cases, the interventions were co-designed by participating historians, history educators and schoolteachers. In all cases, the interventions took place over a number of weeks of structured interaction between students, who received formative

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<sup>39</sup> CHAPMAN, Arthur. *Supporting High Achievement and Transition to Higher Education through History Virtual Academies*, 2010. Warwick: History Subject Centre. Available at: [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/heahistory/elibrary/internal/cs\\_chapman\\_highachievement\\_20091001](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/heahistory/elibrary/internal/cs_chapman_highachievement_20091001) Accessed: 28 Oct 2020 & CHAPMAN, Arthur. 'They have come to differing opinions because of their differing interpretations': Developing 16-19-year-old English students' understandings of historical interpretation through on-line inter-institutional discussion. *International Journal of Historical Learning Teaching and Research*, 11(1), 2012, p.188-214. <https://doi.org/10.18546/HERJ.11.1.13>; CHAPMAN, Arthur, ELLIOT, Gill & POOLE, Robert. *The History Virtual Academy Project: Facilitating inter and intra-sector dialogue and knowledge transfer through online collaboration*, 2012. Warwick: History Subject Centre. Available at: [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/heahistory/resources/br\\_chapman\\_hva\\_20120117.pdf](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/heahistory/resources/br_chapman_hva_20120117.pdf) Accessed: 28 Oct 2020; CHAPMAN, Arthur, & FACEY, Jane. Documentaries, causal linking and hyper-linking: Using learner collaboration, peer and expert assessment and new media to enhance AS history students' causal reasoning. In COOPER, Hilary & CHAPMAN, Arthur (Eds.), *Constructing History, 11-19*. Sage Publications, 2009, p.88-119; CHAPMAN, Arthur & GOLDSMITH, Emily. 'Dialogue between the source and the historian's view occurs': Mapping change in student thinking about historical accounts in expert and peer online discussion. In Arthur CHAPMAN, A. WILSCHUT, (Eds.), *Joined Up History: New directions in history education research*. Information Age Publishing, Inc., 2015, p. 183-2010; CHAPMAN, Arthur & HIBBERT, Barbara. Advancing History post-16: Using e-learning, collaboration and assessment to develop AS and A2 students' understanding of the discipline of history. In COOPER, Hilary & CHAPMAN, Arthur (Eds.), *Constructing History, 11-19*. Sage Publications, 2009, p. 120-148.

<sup>40</sup> CHAPMAN, Arthur. *Supporting High Achievement and Transition to Higher Education through History Virtual Academies*, 2010. Warwick: History Subject Centre. Available at: [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/heahistory/elibrary/internal/cs\\_chapman\\_highachievement\\_20091001](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/heahistory/elibrary/internal/cs_chapman_highachievement_20091001) Accessed: 28 Oct 2020 & CHAPMAN, Arthur. 'They have come to differing opinions because of their differing interpretations': Developing 16-19-year-old English students' understandings of historical interpretation through on-line inter-institutional discussion. *International Journal of Historical Learning Teaching and Research*, 11(1), 2012, p.188-214. <https://doi.org/10.18546/HERJ.11.1.13>; CHAPMAN, Arthur & GOLDSMITH, Emily. 'Dialogue between the source and the historian's view occurs': Mapping change in student thinking about historical accounts in expert and peer online discussion. In Arthur CHAPMAN, A. WILSCHUT, (Eds.), *Joined Up History: New directions in history education research*. Information Age Publishing, Inc., 2015, p. 183-2010.

<sup>41</sup> The History Virtual Academy Project was supported financially by the History Subject Centre of the UK Higher Education Academy and by Edge Hill University in 2007-2012.

feedback on their thinking from academic historians and from a history educator (the author of this paper). In all cases the students were aged 16-19 and following pre-university 'advanced' courses in history. In all cases, interaction was entirely online and mediated through discussion boards. Students were set tasks that required them to explain differences between historical accounts and to complete a number of other tasks, not reported here. This paper compares the contributions to the board of one student, chosen at random from each discussion, to reflect on what the interventions revealed about students' thinking about historical accounts and about ways in which that can be changed through exposure to expert historical thinking.

An intervention developed in 2008 asked students to explain why two historians might give different accounts of the group of radicals from the time of the English Civil Wars in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>42</sup> Students were paired and asked to provide answers to questions - in the case below, explaining why the accounts differed. They were also asked to comment on the ideas providing by the student that they were paired with and they also received feedback from historians and from the discussion board moderator.

One students' response, first, at the start of the intervention and, second, to another student after they had received feedback, are provided below. The feedback they were given between these responses drew the students' attention to ways in which the historians whose texts they were reading may have been active in constructing their accounts - for example, focusing on the enquiries that the historians may have engaged in, including the questions they were asking, how they used evidence and how they defined concepts. In their initial response, the student explained variation in the two pieces of historical writing about the Ranters as follows:

There may be several explanations as to why each Historian has such a different opinion about 'The Ranters.' One explanation could be the extent of research done by each historian. If one historian has done more/less research... or if their range or sources are not very extensive then they may have a less varied view and a more biased attitude... For example, the historian in text one gives many examples that demonstrate a range of knowledge through extensive research... whereas the historian from text two doesn't give as many examples leading to the assumption that he may have read a very limited amount on 'The Ranters' and therefore leading him to the conclusion they were 'fiction.' Then again on the other hand, the historian of text 2 was writing the source in the late 1980s as compared to Historian 1 who wrote his extract in the mid-1970s. In this decade there may have been

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<sup>42</sup> As has been stated, these interventions aimed to do a number of different things. I focus here (and in the 2009 and 2011 cases) on one issue only (explaining variation in accounts) for the purposes of this paper.

new evidence come to light regarding 'The Ranters', resulting in a shift in opinion between the two historians.

The student explains variation by suggesting that the historians differ in the amount that they know - one author has done more research and knows more and the other has simply relied on presupposition and 'bias'. The student also speculates that the amount of source material may explain variation - a somewhat contradictory explanation, since the author that they think knows less was writing later.

After this student made this post, the historian involved in the discussion board and the moderator provided them with feedback suggesting that they consider the questions asked by the author they had been examining and the author's reasoning processes. Subsequently, in their feedback to the student they had been paired with, they made the following observations:

You have gone straight in with the same point I have, looking at the provenance of the sources... instead of reflecting upon the evidence and the argument for each of the interpretations... We haven't looked at whether the historians are actually answering the same questions. Upon reflection, I think the first text is more about who [The Ranters] were and what they believed in whereas the second text focuses more on the question 'were they?' instead of 'who they were'. In your response you mentioned that they used the same sources... In my opinion I thought the first writer used many more examples than the writer in text two and that the sources didn't quite match up... When we have been contemplating why the historians disagree, I think we were a bit narrow when thinking of the reasons why... When looking back at the [historians]..., I can see that they disagree as they have each interpreted the sources they have differently, leading them to two completely contrasting opinions. Again, I think this difference also depends on the hypothesis each of the historians is working on - if they are answering two different questions then yes, obviously the content is going to have a different focus resulting in two contrasting opinions.

In this second post to the forum, the student's explanations now diversified the activities that the historians were engaged in - they now modelled the historians as cognitively active in a wide-range of ways. They had them asking 'questions', they 'interpret' evidence, they worked on 'hypotheses' and they took a 'focus.' It is apparent, then, that over the course of this exercise and as a result of interaction with historians and their texts, this student has increased the sophistication of their thinking about what it is that historians do, elaborating a greater range of actions and, as a result, representing historians as more cognitively active.

In the 2009 intervention students were asked at the beginning to explain, in general, why historians might disagree. They were then introduced to primary source materials on the topic that was to be discussed. They were then asked to read the same texts as had been used in 2008 and to explain why the historians disagreed. A primary evidence-based phase was introduced in this intervention, at the suggestion of the teachers involved, in the hope that the experience of working with source materials would help the students appreciate the challenges that historians faced when working with evidence to produce accounts.

An example of student responses in the first phase, when they answered a general question about historical disagreement, and in the final phase, when they answered a question about disagreement in particular historical texts, is reproduced below. Again, before producing the final text, the student had received general feedback on how they had approached the initial task - feedback that drew attention to legitimate ways in which historians can be active in their constructions of the past. The texts that the students focused on in 2009 were the same as in 2008 and were about The Ranters.

The reason for why historians often come to differing conclusions depends on several factors. Their socio-economic background can influence their personal beliefs which in turn will shape their argument. For example, a Marxist historian will emphasise the role of the workers in certain events. Secondly, the purpose of their argument will affect their conclusions. If their purpose is to answer a specific question, their opinion may be more obvious but if they are providing a general overview, their argument may not be as apparent. Lastly, the extent to which they analyse their evidence will determine their evaluation of their chosen topic as some historians may look deeper into their evidence and find arguments that other historians have failed to notice.

The student's explanation for variations in historians' approaches pulls in a number of directions. Some explanations attribute agency to historians and some do not. Historians are described as passive - as being 'influenced' by their backgrounds which 'influence' what they believe and 'shape' their arguments. On the other hand, historians are presented as setting out to 'answer' different questions and as 'evaluating' and 'analysing' things differently.

The following text is taken from the same student's response to a question asking them to explain why two historical accounts of The Ranters differed. This second text was produced after feedback had been received by the student. The historian who provided feedback encouraged the student away from broad explanations (such as attributing

ideological agendas to the historians) and asked them to focus more closely on what they could find in the texts they were reading.

There are several reasons why these historians say different things about the Ranters. This is mainly due to the sources available being secondary and these have been interpreted in different ways. Historian A has interpreted these sources as fact not questioning the provenance and whether these are reliable. On the other hand, historian B challenges this view arguing that, 'we have no evidence of any substance to suggest that Ranterism was anything more than a series of postures struck by a handful of writers'. He says this because many of these sources are anonymous and on the whole written by those opposed to Ranterism. Another way in which sources have been interpreted in different ways is when considering the Blasphemy Act of 1650. Historian A claims that this was, 'aimed especially at attacks on religion and morality', insinuating that this act was specifically created to end Ranterism. However, Historian B's opinion is that the, 'act made no direct mention of Ranters', showing that other historians have jumped to conclusions without considering contemporary issues of that time, which also affected religion and morality. Effectively differences in historians' opinions stem from how their own opinions and beliefs can interfere with their interpretation of the source...

There are common features in their first and second responses, although the second is clearly much more focused on detail, as it has a specific case to analyse and does not explore differences in interpretation in general. As was the case in the 2008 example, we can see greater attribution of agency to historians in the second text. The student's characterisation of the two historians differs, since they see one as more active than the other, but it is clear that the student presents historians as more active in their second post than in their first. In their second post to the discussion board, the student describes historians as 'interpreting', 'questioning' provenance, 'challenging' views, 'arguing', attributing differing meaning to aspects of the past, coming to 'conclusions', 'considering' (or failing to consider) contexts, and criticising other historians. The student attributes the differences between the decisions that the historians have made to one historian having paid less attention to context and allowing their 'opinions and beliefs to interfere' in their analysis - an analysis that has some echoes of their comments on backgrounds influencing interpretation in their first post, perhaps, although this mode of explanation is now more muted.

In 2011 the design of the intervention varied again, as a result of discussions with the teachers and the historians involved. In this design, three historical texts were used - rather than two. This was at the suggestion of the teachers, who argued that having two texts played into students' misconception that history was about 'side-taking'. In the initial stage of the

design, students were asked to explain variation in two written texts - as had been the case in both 2008 and 2009. A new element was introduced in the second phase of the activity: again, an historian provided students with feedback on their arguments, but this time the historian themselves first provided a third text, setting out an alternative argument on the issue. The focus, again, was on the seventeenth century, but this time on Cromwell not The Ranters. It should be noted, also, that the 2011 design was focused on content that the students had prior knowledge of - something that was not true of the 2008 and 2009 designs. Again, I will focus on one example to explore the kinds of impact that the activities had on students. Here is an example of an initial response to the task, prior to feedback being provided.

One reason why these historians may have different interpretations is because they used different evidence to reach their conclusions. Historian A has used recent research by Blair Worden, which was presumably not available when Historian B wrote his book. The research showed that Cromwell wielded immense personal power; this may explain Historian A's focus on Cromwell's personal mistakes which led to the failure of the success of the Protectorate.

Like the 2008 example, this student focuses on time and changes in the knowledge context between the two texts in order to explain difference. The differences in knowledge context are attributed to the influence of another historian's research. Unlike the 2009 example, there is no focus on who the historians 'are' (their backgrounds). As was the case in the first 2009 example, but now exclusively, historians are represented as legitimately cognitively active - they 'use' evidence inferentially to 'reach conclusions' and they make decisions about what to 'focus' attention on.

Once the third text was introduced, the student posted a fuller analysis, as follows.

At a basic level, one reason why historians might give different reasons for the limited success of the Protectorate is that they have used different evidence. For example, the county studies of the 1960s/70s provided a wealth of new evidence not available to previous historians, which probably influenced any judgments on the Protectorate after local data was available. Furthermore, even when using the same evidence historians may come to different conclusions depending upon how much weight they put on certain types of evidence. For example, in last week's extract assessing the Protectorate, Historian A makes use of the writings of contemporary foreign ambassadors in order to prove that Cromwell was personally responsible for the limited success of the Protectorate. Other historians might take the view that not so much weight can be attached to this evidence because ambassadors would not necessarily be extremely well-informed about the real workings of the government.

Aside from the use of sources, another reason why historians come to different conclusions about the success of the Protectorate is because they measure success differently. As [the author of the third account] has pointed out, some historians assess success or failure by using hindsight, arguing that the Restoration demonstrated the failure of Cromwell's regime. Other historians have placed the benchmark for the Protectorate's success or failure at how well Cromwell achieved his aims of creating a godly society. Ultimately, historians' assessments depend on what they believe Cromwell's main aims in the Protectorate were and how well they think he achieved them.

Their second post begins very much as their first post had - emphasising how the state of debate affects what historians can argue. However, they qualify this emphasising the active role that historians play in making sense of what is known ('using... evidence... come to... conclusions') and in making judgments in their inferences (putting 'weight... on... types of evidence'). Again, historians' agency is *cognitive* agency - Historian A is represented as making 'use... to prove...' and other historians are described as not doing so because they make differing judgments of evidential value. Historians' cognitive agency is also described criterially, in terms of conceptual questions (how to 'measure success') and the overall conclusions that historians come to are explained in terms of relationships between what historians come to believe about the past (about Cromwell's 'aims') and judgments that historians make ('how well they think he achieved them').

## Conclusions

Any conclusions drawn from the comparisons of a small number of examples can be permissive only and not conclusive, and the conclusions that I can advance here must, therefore, be tentative.

All the cases presented above indicate, firstly, that most of the students discussed began their participation in these interventions with reasonably sophisticated ideas about accounts. Although there is some reference to 'bias' in the first of the two posts from 2008, and some reference to the notion of historians imposing ideological assumptions 'shaping' their accounts in the first of the 2009 posts, there is substantial reference to cognitive activity of a legitimate kind in the first 2009 post and in the first 2011 post. All three cases show an increase in focus on cognitive activity in explanations offered for account variation offered after interaction with historians and history educators in the discussion boards, and there is some evidence of criterial thinking about concept definition in the second post from



2011, an indicator of considerable sophistication.<sup>43</sup> Reflection ‘upon the evidence and the argument for each of the interpretations’ - to use the 2008 student’s language - comes more clearly into view in these later posts and there are notable increases in the range of cognitive activities, verbs, and verb phrases attributed to the historians, all of which point to a clearer sense of the fact that historians are active in constructing the historical past in their accounts in legitimate ways.

It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that interaction with historians and with historians’ texts should have positive impacts on students’ understandings of what historians do and of what historical texts are, and this finding is corroborated by earlier work on these data sets.<sup>44</sup> It is, nevertheless, encouraging to find this and to see some evidence of consistency in outcomes across three examples drawn from separate learning interventions (2008, 2009 and 2011). It would be foolhardy to draw very much comfort from these findings educationally, however, since evidence of short-term impacts observable over a number of weeks in an educational intervention is not evidence of durable change in students’ thinking about history more generally. It would also be foolish to infer positive conclusions from these findings for the wider education aims that often motivate history educators - given evidence that transfer of learning from history to everyday contexts cannot be assumed in the case of historical evidence.<sup>45</sup> There is, nevertheless, comfort to be taken from the clear suggestion in these cases that online collaboration with historians seems to have done cognitive good rather than harm and seems to have enhanced student understandings of historians cognitive agency and of how histories are constructed. Further longitudinal studies are needed to explore what stronger conclusions it might become possible to draw. Studies at scale are also needed to draw more generalisable conclusions.

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<sup>43</sup> LEE, Peter, J. History in an Information Culture. *History Education Research Journal*, 1(2), 26–43, 2001.

<https://doi.org/info:doi/10.18546/HERJ.01.2.05>, pp.26-43

<sup>44</sup> For example, CHAPMAN, Arthur & GOLDSMITH, Emily. ‘Dialogue between the source and the historian’s view occurs’: Mapping change in student thinking about historical accounts in expert and peer online discussion. In Arthur CHAPMAN, A. WILSCHUT, (Eds.), *Joined Up History: New directions in history education research*. Information Age Publishing, Inc., 2015, p. 183–2010.

<sup>45</sup> WINEBURG, Sam. *Why Learn History (When It’s Already on Your Phone)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018, pp. 145–149.