Collaborative, Multi-perspective Historical Writing: The Explanatory Power of a Dialogical Framework

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Abstract: When introducing students to the multi-perspective and interpretative nature of history within collaborative contexts, what are the relationships of individuals from conflicting groups with historical accounts that they produced as a group? How does the joint writing influence their historical understanding? We analyzed the joint accounts produced by post-primary Israeli students, Jews and Arabs, who collaboratively e-investigated events related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Employing a thematic analysis and a Bakhtinian-inspired discourse analysis, we found that the joint texts were constructed of themes from both in-groups' perspectives. Students constructed a dialogic relationship between these themes, which enabled them to legitimize the other's voice, yet keep the voices unmerged. These texts reflect a new historical meaning and a better understanding of the nature of history.

Introduction

Within the history education community, interest in introducing students to the multi-perspective and interpretative nature of history is growing (Stradling, 2003). When these educational goals are pursued within collaborative contexts, what are the relationships of individuals from conflicting groups with historical accounts that they produced as a group? Wertsch's theoretical framework is often used to articulate the interaction of agents with historical presentations. According to Wertsch, our interaction with a historical presentation is bi-dimensional: (a) a cognitive dimension, or the mastering of a presentation; and (b) an affective dimension related to one's identity and sense of belonging, which promotes either the appropriation or resistance of a presentation. This framework is powerful in explaining situations in which a bias exists in students' interactions with historical presentations, caused by their appropriation and resistance of the in- and out-group narratives, respectively, e.g., why individuals often accept whatever supports their beliefs but meticulously examine and critique anything that contradicts them (Wertsch, 2000).

In a previous work, we investigated the interactions within 26 foursomes of Israeli post-primary students, Jews and Arabs/Palestinians who collaboratively investigated events related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As expected, most discussions were disputatious. Yet, 15 disputatious groups produced a group account with a historical presentation agreed upon all group members. What historical perspective is manifested in the joint essay? What is the relationships between the historical perspective manifested in the joint text and the participants' perspectives on the event?

The experiment

The historical event was Britain's issuance of the Churchill White Paper in 1922. The British explained that they wanted to settle "[t]he tension which [had] prevailed from time to time in Palestine". One assignment was How did both sides (Arabs and Jews) respond to this document, and why? In phase1, students worked in ethnically homogenous pairs. They read all the sources and uploaded their answers to the assignment questions. In phase2, they work in bi-ethnic foursomes. They read and commented on each other's answers, and then conduct a synchronous textual e-discussion, aimed at producing a joint written summary of the event.

We analyzed the essays produced in phase1 and phase2 of all 15 groups who produced a joint essay. We employed a historical content analysis (Peck et al, 2011) in order to identify the students' perceptions of the three major historical agents: British, Arab (i.e., Palestinian), and Jewish. We employed the Bakhtin-inspired (1981; 1984) method of discourse analysis in order to identify the voices that the students integrated into their utterances and the interactions between them (Kamberelis & Scott, 1992). One interaction type is *hidden polemic*, which refers to cases when users' use of words (previously used by another voice) influences the original goal of the original speaker, thereby expressing the user's disagreement or it introduces tension with the original goal of the utterance.

Results and discussion

Wertsch's (1998) two-dimensional framework of mastery and appropriation/resistance was forceful in articulating the interaction of students with their in- and out- group narratives when producing the pairs' essays. In line with the vast empirical work conducted on students' interactions with multiple historical representations

(e.g., Wertsch, 2000), the pairs chose to integrate into their essays those themes that aligned with their in-group narrative and ignore those that aligned with the Other-group narrative. In fact, we observed a dichotomy in the frequencies of the themes in the essays of the Arab/Palestinian pairs (APs) and the Jewish pairs.

The discourse analysis revealed that in all the joint essays share several characteristics: (a) they are composed of bits of pre-existing (pairs') perspectives; (b) they are compatible with both the Zionist and Palestinian historical narratives; and yet (c) they create a whole new meaning regarding the historical agents' actions and the complex interests and constraints, in which they played a role. The two contrasting perspectives neither disintegrated nor fuses into one. These characteristics are demonstrated in the following example. Table 1 presents text segments from one group essay and the matching segments from the pair's essays.

Table 1: The response of the Arab historical agent to the issuance of the White paper in 1922

The AP's essay	The JP's essay	The group essay
The response of the Arab side was negative. They were angry because their lands were taken from them.	The Arab population did not agree with the White Paper because they interpreted in an exaggerated way the promises made to the Jews in the White Paper.	The Arab population did not agree with the White Paper because it was perceived as the beginning of a process whereby their lands would be taken [from them].

Both JP's and AP's original voices are evident in the group utterance, that the AP "perceived it as the beginning of the process of taking their lands". The idea regarding taking lands resembles the AP's essay. However, it is altered, from past tense ('were taken') to future tense ('would be taken'). This phrase is concatenated to "the beginning of a process". The change of the original AP's text allows the JP to maintain a *hidden polemic* interaction with AP's original idea. "The beginning of the process" means that this agent still had time to change its destiny, which is compatible with the Zionist perspective that this agent was non-pragmatic. Putting the issue of taking land in the Arab historical agent's perception also helps the JP to express their disagreement with this idea. Therefore, this text is compatible with both the Zionist and the Palestinian perspectives. It is unlikely to assume that these students did not understand that the text can be read differently. The AP choose not to mention anything about the end of the process as they did in the pair essay and JP did not mention the Jews' right to the land. The hidden polemic enabled the students to live peacefully with the text, although while being aware of the other's possible interpretation of it. Hence, students' interaction with the different narratives is beyond merely mastery or appropriation/resistance.

Nevertheless, the joint text reflects an improvement in students' historical understanding of the event. The combination of voices brings about a new reason for the Arabs' disagreement with the White paper, different from what was claimed by both AP and JP in their pair essays. Moreover, in the joint essay participants describe a historical process and avoid emotional empathy (as in AP's text) and moral judgment (as in JP's text) vis-à-vis the historical agent. In conclusion, students' interaction with their in- and out-group voices in the joint texts is more dialogical than is their interaction with these voices in the pair essays. This is in line with Humanities education's goal of humanizing students, i.e. assisting them in re-examining how they perceive themselves and others, and the limitations of their understanding of the world (Wineburg, 2001).

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