

Teacher strategies for fostering collaborative historical reasoning in whole-class discussions

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Abstract: Whole-class discussions in which students and teacher reason together and co-construct knowledge are, next to small group work, important in communities of learners. In this study we address the question of what strategies history teachers use to provoke and support collaborative historical reasoning in whole-class discussions. Analyses included transcripts of four whole-class discussions and stimulated recall interviews with the teachers and revealed differences in the extent to which they succeeded in provoking collaborative historical reasoning.

Theoretical Framework

Whole-class discussions are common practice in history education. In more traditional history classrooms these whole-class discussions are controlled by the teacher, in the sense that (s)he takes initiative, asks questions, lectures and explains, gives directions, and evaluative feedback. More recent socio-constructive perspectives on learning highlight the collaborative construction of knowledge. Whole-class discussions that take place in these latter settings, such as approaches of community of learners, stress the active participation of students and collaborative reasoning about and with the key-concepts of the subject-matter. This is not easy to achieve. Several studies indicate that the quality of student discourse in community-of-learners classrooms is not very high and that collaborative reasoning is difficult to achieve (e.g., Mintrop, 2004).

What strategies can teachers use to promote collaborative reasoning within whole-class discussions? Mercer (1995) mentions for example making 'we' statements, literal recapping and reconstructive recapping of past activity, eliciting relevant knowledge from students, and elaborating replies received. Kovalainen, Kumpulainen, and Vasama (2001/2002) identified four modes of teacher participation in a community-of-learners classroom during whole-class discussions, namely: an evocative mode, a facilitative mode, a collective mode, and an appreciative mode. However, these studies mainly focus on the domain of science and mathematics, and hardly on the domain of history. Furthermore, these studies do not specifically focus on whole-class discussions that are preceded by collaborative working in small groups, as is often the case in community of learners classrooms.

Research question and method

The main question underlying this study is: To what extent and how do history teachers succeed in orchestrating collaborative historical reasoning in whole-class discussions that follow small group work? This exploratory study is part of a larger research-project that investigates the effects of combining group work with whole-class discussions, in which knowledge of history concepts is co-constructed, on the establishment of shared knowledge within the class and on reasoning with these concepts in subsequent small group work. Outcomes of the presented study will be used to develop a training for teachers that participate in this research-project.

We videotaped four whole-class discussions in history and used stimulated recall interviews in order to elicit the practical knowledge of the teachers (Meijer, Zanting & Verloop, 2002) on the strategies they use to elicit collaborative historical reasoning. They were also asked some more general questions about whole-class discussions. Participants were four experienced teachers from different schools. The teachers Erica and Deanne both taught to students in pre-university education (15-16 years of age). Erica gave an introduction to the history of the United States and Deanne talked about collaboration and resistance during WW2. Gerald contextualized with his students (general secondary education, 16-17 years of age) several historical sources in time. And Tina discussed with her students from general secondary education (13-14 years old) drawings about the colonization period.

The transcripts were analyzed on indicators of collaborative historical reasoning. We describe collaborative historical reasoning in whole-class discussions here as the situation in which the teacher and his/her students organize information about the past in order to describe, compare, and/or explain historical phenomena (Van Drie & Van Boxtel, in press), with students as active participants and building on each other's contributions. The extent to which students had an active role in the discussions was measured as the percentage of utterances of the students, the number of different students that participate, and the number of instances of students reacting directly on another student without interference of the teacher. Flanders' Interaction Analysis

Categories (Flanders, 1970) was used to analyze the interaction between teacher and students. Lastly, the transcripts were analyzed on appearance and components of historical reasoning: contextualization; description; description of changes; explanation; use of sources; and argumentation) (Van Drie, Van Boxtel, Jaspers & Kanselaar, 2005).

Results

To what extent did the teachers succeed in orchestrating collaborative historical reasoning? The discussions led by Gerald and Deanne showed most contributions of students. About 40% of the utterances were of the students, compared to Erica 24% and Tina 21%. In Deanne's discussion a lot of different students participated, about 70%. The percentage of participating students was for Gerald 58%, for Tina 48%, and for Erica 42% (the classes consisted of 19-24 students). The number of times students responded directly to each other differed a lot: 37 times for Gerald, 10 times for Deanne, Tina 2 times, and Erica not at all. The outcomes of four categories of the instrument of Flanders are especially interesting in relation to orchestrating collaborative reasoning, which are accepting or using ideas of students, lecturing, giving directions, and pupil-talk initiation. There was not so much difference in the acceptance or use of ideas of students (Deanne 10%; Gerald 9%; Tina 9%; Erica 6%). The discussions led by Gerald and Deanne showed more student initiation (25% and 23%) compared to Erica (14%) and Tina (5%). Erica and Tina gave more directions (Erica 24%; Tina 15%; Deanne 9%; Gerald 4%) and the discussions led Gerald and Tina showed most lecturing (Tina 23%; Gerald 20%; Erica 9%; Deanne 8%). In each of the discussions one component of historical reasoning that is related to the specific task at hand, is central (Deanne: argumentation, Erica: description; Gerald: contextualization, and Tina: use of sources). Both the teacher and the students showed a lot of reasoning of this type. In all cases, the teachers, however, also used other components of historical reasoning that are not directly related to the type of task discussed. In the interviews the teachers mentioned several strategies which they used to provoke collaborative historical reasoning, for example asking stimulating questions, restating students' comments, summarizing, and asking students to respond to each others interpretations and arguments.

Conclusions and discussion

The analyses revealed differences in the extent to which the teachers succeeded in orchestrating collaborative historical reasoning in whole-class discussions. In general, the discussions led by Deanne and Gerald showed more collaborative historical reasoning: more active student participation and initiation. Strategies that were used to provoke collaborative historical reasoning are amongst others: involving as many students as possible, inviting students to respond to each others interpretations and arguments, accepting and building on students' ideas, summarizing, using waiting-time, asking questions, not giving direct evaluative feedback (instead of which the teacher can ask questions that may make him discover his misinterpretation or asking other students to respond), and introducing different components of historical reasoning. The analysis of historical reasoning suggests that the teacher has an important role in enriching the reasoning in the classroom by initiating different types of historical reasoning. Since the four whole-class discussions showed a lot of differences (i.e., tasks, topic, age, school-level) the outcomes should be handled with care, and more (qualitative) research is needed to discern the particular (domain-specific) strategies teachers use to promote collaborative historical reasoning.

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