

Historical Reasoning - Extended: A Case Study

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Researching Historical Reasoning – Widely Neglected

In the study of learning, the educational research community focused nearly exclusively on the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). As Wineburg (1996) and Leinhardt (1994) pointed out, compared to the amount of studies and research programs in these fields, we virtually don't know anything about learning in the fields of humanities. Most of the approaches focused on overhauling the curricula by integrating missing content, and identifying best resources and materials. Critique arose especially against the 'coverage of content' approach by pointing out that the mere remembrance of events, biographies, and the chronological ordering of them do not foster the meaning making and development of critical thinking skills (Seixas, 2000; Stearns 1993, 1998; Wineburg, 1991). The study on expert-novice differences brought another aspect of critique against traditional forms of teaching/learning history. Wineburg (1991), Seixas (1993), Greene (1994a), and Wiley & Voss (1996) argue that in studying history, students should be engaged in tasks that replicate real-historians' tasks. Students would become what Wiley & Voss call "knowledge transformers" instead of "knowledge tellers" (1996, p. S64) and classrooms would be transformed into "communities of inquiry" (Seixas 1993, p.310). So, a community of researchers focused on research on what Sam Wineburg calls "historical thinking" (Wineburg, 2001).

Historical Reasoning - Mostly Conceptualized as Domain Independent Reasoning

Most of the research is focusing on students' learning and understanding history within what Wiley & Voss call "the standard 'read-to-write' approach of history instruction" (1996, p. S63). For example studies, see VanSledright & Franks (1998), Flower (1990), Wineburg (1994), Greene (1994a & 1994b), Wiley & Voss (1996), Hartmann, (1995), Stahl et al. (1996), and (Hartmann, 1995). Another line of research focuses on students causal reasoning in the domain of history, contending the main outcome of historical reasoning is detecting the arguments within narratives. For example studies see Perfetti, Britt, & Georgi (1995), Rouet et al. (1998), Lee, Dickinson, & Ashby (1998), Perfetti, Britt & Georgi (1995). Some research, like Wineburg (2001), Greene (1994b), and Evans (1990), compares the thinking of historians to that of novices, be they K-12 students or undergraduates.

From the above-cited literature, two main streams of conceptualizing 'historical reasoning' can be identified. Some scholars like Perfetti et al. (1995) and Limon & Carretero (1998) argue for a general unified principle of reasoning, and draw heavily on literature on reasoning from STEM. Other researchers try to distinguish historical reasoning from reasoning in the STEM domains by arguing for a domain specific reasoning as what Stahl et al. call "disciplinary knowledge" (1995, p.432), Seixas calls "pedagogical content knowledge" (1999, p.319), Holt (1995) calls 'thinking historically', and Stearns calls "the complexity of the analytical opportunities in the discipline" (Stearns 1998, p. 286). Most of the authors leave it explicitly or implicitly to others to flesh the theory out

Extending the Conceptualizations of Historical Reasoning: A Single Case Study

The author conducted 12 interviews with a SME in American History of Religion. The study used the task knowledge structures approach (TKS) as developed by Johnson and Johnson (1991) and analytical induction as qualitative methodologies. Analysis of the interviews produced goal and reasoning trees for historical reasoning and an extensive table on. Findings show that causal reasoning is not as dominant in the thought processes of this particular SME who considers himself in the camp of post-modern historians. He rather reacted "allergic" to approaches of causality that were pertinent to traditional approaches in history, trying to avoid to fall in positions close to positivism, determinism, or historicism. Acknowledging other historians' approaches, the SME rather referred to his research as "revealing pre-conditions of many different responses in which possibilities got limited" (original quote from interview), instead of speaking of cause and effect. Additionally, he emphasized the active role of historians in constructing history and the meaning of events rather than revealing the one true story. Most of other research however argues causal reasoning and the the query for what 'really' happened is in the core of history.

References

References upon request.