

The Impact of Critical History Practices on History Learning

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Abstract: This paper explores the learning supported in disciplinary education that incorporates critical social analysis (CSA). CSA is the process of interrogating the values and impact of sociopolitical systems and re-imagining these systems to create new ethical ways of being. Limited work has explored these interdisciplinary contexts, specifically in history education--a discipline that holds resonance with CSA but is frequently taught through an a-political lens. As a result, I conducted an ethnographic study of a high school history class that incorporated CSA, asking if and how did the integration of CSA into this history classroom influence student disciplinary learning? Through on-going qualitative analysis, initial findings indicate that the integration of CSA led to the emergence of critical history practices. I specifically look at two practices, critical historical argumentation and historical imaginative inquiry, to demonstrate how these interdisciplinary practices deepened student historical disciplinary learning and political and ethical meaning-making.

Keywords: history learning, critical social analysis, disciplinary education, critical history practices

Introduction

A growing body of research is demonstrating the powerful ways critical education frameworks, like ethnic studies, support learning and development (Dee & Penner, 2017; Sleeter, 2011). These frameworks support student development of critical social analysis (CSA), the process of interrogating the values and impact of sociopolitical systems and re-imagining these systems to create new ethical ways of being (Giroux, 2011; Freire, 1970). Recent work explores the expansive ways CSA deepens disciplinary learning, inviting students to bring their whole selves into the learning process (Warren, Vossoughi, Rosebery, Bang, & Taylor, In Press, pg. 7). Limited work has looked at how CSA impacts history education, a discipline that holds much resonance with CSA but is frequently taught through an a-political lens (Banks, 2012; Freedman, 2015). Arguably, a narrow view of history has directly contributed to a growing nationalistic sociopolitical landscape in which marginalized communities are facing exacerbated forms of violence and oppression (Politics of Learning Writing Collective, 2017). We need to understand how the integration of CSA in history can expand disciplinary learning support forms of valued forms of participation.

This paper explores the learning supported in a high school history class in which the teacher incorporated CSA. Collecting field notes, jottings, and video recordings, I trace the form and function (Saxe & Esmonde, 2005) of the local CSA and history practices. Initial findings demonstrate how the integration of CSA into history education led to the emergence of CSA-history integrated practices, what I call critical history practices. When students engaged critical history practices, new learning experiences emerged that appeared to be consequential to students' current and future ways of being. I focus on two critical history practices, critical historical argumentation and historical imaginative inquiry, and the ways these specific practices were designed for and taken-up by students. These findings illuminate potential new forms of disciplinary learning while providing insights into design and teaching that interweave, rather than dichotomize, disciplinary education and CSA.

History education and critical social analysis

A limited body of work has demonstrated the potential of CSA for deepening history learning. Integrating critical theory into history education, Freedman (2015) argued that CSA actually works to support a subjective understanding of historical narration and better prepare students for the realities and ethical questions that imbue historical inquiry. This work reflects budding research that critiques a-political forms of history teaching while highlighting the expansive potential of CSA for supporting students' critical receptivity of evidentiary sources (Bain, 2006) historical sense-making that centers students' cultural and political knowledge and histories (Goldberg et al., 2011).

History education also has the potential to expand CSA in meaningful ways. The history practices of 'evaluating the credibility of information, weighing competing accounts, and mounting historical arguments' (Smith et al., 2019, pg. 2) all align theoretically with CSA practices, but are often neglected in favor of orienting students to the 'politically right' answer rather than allowing them to develop their own understandings of the world in humanizing ways (Jackson & Vossoughi, 2018; Wineburg, 2010). For example, Santiago's (2019) work on the role of Mexican Americans in U.S. history curricula has demonstrated the ways historical inquiry offers

fruitful opportunities for generatively complicating students' understanding of race and racial progress, a key CSA practice. Both CSA and history education have the potential to expand and deepen their respective core values when integrated together.

Theoretical framework and analytic process

The project context was at a Midwestern high school U.S. history class. 15 of the 23 students participated in the project. Participating students self-identified in the following ways: six as Black, four as white, two as Latinx/Hispanic, two as multiracial, and one as Asian American. I asked: if and how did the integration of CSA into a history classroom influence student disciplinary learning? In this paper, I define learning as expanding forms of participation through the transformative use of practices (Rogoff, 2003). Practices are conceptualized as a shared repertoire of resources amongst a group or community of people that include stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems, and habits of mind (Wenger, 2011). To trace the practices emergent in this classroom context, I draw upon the conceptual framework of form-function shifts. Form-function shifts highlight the evolution of practices, documenting how shifts in form (the physical/embodied structure of a practice) is connected to shifts in function (the use and purpose of the practice) and vice versa (Saxe & Esmonde, 2005). This framework helps capture and trace various ways students were using CSA and history practices within and across activities.

Data collection for this project was motivated by ethnographic methodologies (Erickson, 1992), ideal for tracing CSA and history practices in moment-to-moment interactions. During the 2018-2019 school year, I spent three days a week collecting jottings & field notes (n=54) and video recordings (n=26). My analytic process includes process coding all jottings and field notes to name and characterize emergent practices and using micro-ethnographic methods to analyze the particular ways students used these practice. Initial findings demonstrate how the integration of CSA into the class led to the development of new hybrid practices I call critical history practices. I focus on two practice,: critical historical argumentation and historical imaginative inquiry, to show how these critical history practices were designed for and initially taken-up by students and how students emergently engaged these practices during class.

Critical historical argumentation

Critical historical argumentation privileges complexity as an explicit goal of historical argument building by attending to the sociopolitical systems that connect different historical narratives. This is unique from historical argumentation because the explicit function is to build a politically complex portrayal of historical events by attending to the role of power rather than segmenting out contradictory evidence into separate, unrelated arguments (Freedman, 2015). Consider this vignette of a journal activity in which students were explicitly encouraged to use critical historical argumentation. After discussing the different messages embedded in the painting as a class Mr. King (the teacher) asked students to write about the painting "American Progress" by John Gast:

Mr. King asked students to write their own historical argument about the painting, saying "there is a lot going on here but as historians we need to make an argument about the painting and defend it with evidence." Micki, who identified as Asian American, developed an argument focused on the positive impact of expansion for innovation and technology. I asked her where Indigenous peoples fit in with her argument and she said, "I was worried if I brought in the Native Americans it would contradict my argument." I told her "it wouldn't contradict it because both things were happening at the same time, it's important that we make sense of it." After talking through some ways to connect the two messages, Micki decided to add to her argument: "while simultaneously forcing the Indigenous peoples out of their lands." She then asked me if John Gast believed in American progress. I said that I thought he had a critical view of American progress because of his incorporation of Indigenous peoples. She then pushed back and said "but the Native Americans were in the dark [shading] though, like they were in sin" and I agreed with her.

In this vignette, Micki recognized the two competing historical messages but only focused on the former as a way to present a concise argument that was easily defensible (Santiago, 2019). One might interpret Micki's initial argument as a window into her perception of normative expectations around argumentation in school. For history classes, argumentation often functions to foreground narratives that shine positive light on the U.S. in order to instill nationalistic forms of patriotism (Wineburg, 2010). However, Micki clarified her understanding of the two narratives but explained she felt uncertain in how to reconcile the two seemingly

contradictory messages. Micki appeared to be making sense of critical historical argumentation in her own historical thinking, acknowledging the different political realities of the two narratives and working to reconcile the differences. Micki adding in the actions of Indigenous peoples into her argument appears to indicate her take-up and growing sense-making of the function of this critical historical practice. This sense-making continued later in the conversation in her questioning of Gast's perspective of American progress. While Micki was developing her own understanding of how to connect different historical messages to build an explanatory argument, she was also challenging herself in breaking down an already developed historical argument (Gast's argument on American progress) to unpack the different messages and political assumptions embedded in the arguments' construction. Micki engagement in critical historical argumentation helped her work towards new lines of inquiry, expanding her own historical thinking even as she was still making sense of the practice itself.

Historical imaginative inquiry

Historical imaginative inquiry refers to the process of actively questioning and investigating historical events that did not, but could have, happened (Berry, In preparation). This is distinct from normative historical inquiry practices as it incorporates aspects of social imagination (Gutiérrez, 2008), a CSA practice in which individuals build a shared vision of an idea not yet to be. Historical imaginative inquiry works to support 1) a deep understanding of the historical context and consequences of events, 2) critical hypothesizing of the immediate context that would be most impacted by this change, and 3) a longitudinal awareness of how historical trajectories result in current society. Take this example of the emergent use of this critical history practice during a class discussion on race. During this day, Mr. King and students were debriefing their reading of Gloria Anzaldúa's book *Borderlands*. After reading a section of the book, Mr. King asked students what key ideas from the text they wanted to talk about:

Students began to discuss the role of racism and discrimination described in the book. Daniel, who identified as Jamaican-American man, asked the class: "Do you think there would be races if the colonists didn't take over?" Taylor, who identified as a biracial Black woman, offered her perspective, saying "I don't know if it would have come this early, but race goes along with oppression. It's made for a reason that would have happened, but maybe delayed a little bit." Daniel responded, "What would have happened if they were not brought from their homeland? What would that be like? If no one ever left your continent? How would technology have happened?" Roxana, who identified as a Latina, responded to Daniel, "if everything didn't happen, races wouldn't have existed." Taylor then posed a question to the class, "what if the colonist came over didn't enslave them, would they have accepted them?" Before anyone could respond, Mr. King interjected and transitioned the conversation back to the book.

In this discussion, students were actively engaging historical imaginative inquiry by theorizing what the world would be like if colonists didn't introduce races in the U.S.. By Daniel raising this question, he invited his peers to grapple with a fundamental tension in history: continuity and change (Seixas & Peck, 2004). Students did this by demonstrating a deep understanding of the historical context and consequences of particular events (the introduction of races by colonists), engaging in analytic interrogation of the immediate context that would be most impacted by this change (questioning the inevitability of slavery and relations between Europeans and Africans), and a longitudinal understanding of historical narratives explicating how this change would have impacted the local and global trajectories of current society (whether we would have technological development or racial oppression). Critical imaginative inquiry appeared to open a more conceptually expansive form of historical inquiry for students by encouraging the interrogation of historical evidence and theory-building. This theory-building reflects the kind of historical agency (Seixas & Peck, 2004) sought after in history education, helping students to imagine new historical trajectories and current realities.

Discussion

As more schools work to implement critical education frameworks into disciplinary learning environments, we need to better understand how these frameworks shape learning through the incorporation of CSA. In this context, we see how disciplinary learning was expanding in ways that deepened historical thinking and sense-making. For critical historical argumentation, Micki was starting to confront historical tension to recognize how multiple social realities existed throughout history because of sociopolitical systems, and the importance for making this multiplicity visible to better understand the social realities experienced today. For critical imaginative inquiry, students used historical evidence to imagine alternative realities that support their own historical agency in making change in the world. In both of these practices, students appeared to be using critical history practices to engage

in the history discipline with political and ethical intentionality. Politically by centering the sociopolitical systems mediating the historical evidence and narratives they engage; ethically by working to re-imagine historical events to better understand what could have changed then and what can change now. These initial findings offer insights into the potential for these interdisciplinary educational contexts for supporting expansive disciplinary learning.

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