Conceptual Confusion in the History Classroom

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Abstract: This paper addresses the inherent difficulties of learning concepts in the history classroom—inherent, because unlike disciplines that use a specialized vocabulary for concepts, history draws on the linguistic resources of everyday life, and uses the same concepts in different historical contexts. Relying on an eight-month classroom ethnography in a Jerusalem high school, I show how seemingly straightforward concepts such as "anti-Semitism" and "Nationalism" become, in the transaction of classroom life, a site of confusion reflecting the complexity of 'school history': learning about the past while struggling to find a common ground between disciplinary terms, on the one hand, and student knowledge and interests on the other. A close investigation of this confusion calls attention to how the disciplinary—everyday life and schooling—may be at cross purposes, and how we can become more astute in how to deal with this.

Major issue addressed

In this paper I explore the challenges students face when learning concepts in the history classroom. Learning concepts and conceptual change have been dominant topics in science and math education for the past few decades but are rarely discussed in history education (Hallden, 1997). While biology concepts such as photosynthesis have clear definitions within the discipline and such concepts are generally used only in a biology context and not daily life (excluding metaphors) questions like "What is a historical concept?" or "What is the definition of a concept used in history such as 'fascism'?" seem less clear. Certainly many definitions of fascism can be found in textbooks and elsewhere, but understanding that twentieth-century fascism in Italy is not the same as a Texas congressman calling his President a "fascist dictator" (July 17, 2009 [LPAC]) is a challenge unique to the discipline of history.

The whole notion of generalizing in history, which lies at the core of conceptualizing, is viewed by some philosophers as ahistorical (Mink, 1987). Seen through this approach, history is about the concrete and particular rather than something abstract and general. But while the use of concepts in history may at times cloud more than it clarifies, teachers and students are discussing history concepts, both directly and indirectly, in classrooms around the world, and textbooks and tests are addressing them more frequently. This paper explores the confusion caused by such concepts as anti-Semitism and nationalism in a high school history classroom, and argues that while the use of concepts in the classroom is unavoidable, it presents difficulties for understanding both the history topics being discussed and the concepts themselves.

Consider the following excerpt from a high school history classroom in Jerusalem:

Ms. Stern: Today we will be talking about the Jews in Russia in the nineteenth century —In previous lessons we talked about the Jews in Western Europe and their acceptance and rejection, and we called this rejection anti-Semitism, but we didn't explain the term. What is anti-Semitism?
A few Students: Anti--?
Ms. Stern: "Anti" means against, and "Semitism"--?
Same students: Uh . . .
Ms. Stern: Shem was one of Noah's sons. What's the connection between him and the Jews?
Moti: The Jews came from Shem.
Ms. Stern: The Semites were a group of nations that originated from "Shem," including the Jews, Arabs, Aramaeans, and nations from all over the Middle East that had a common biological origin.
Tamar: So it's not just a term for the Jews?
Ms. Stern: No, it doesn't just refer to the Jews, but it eventually became a term that only applies to Jews.
Male student: What do you mean by "Semitic Nations?"
Ms Stern: The Semitic nations are a group of nations that originated from Shem.---
Shimi: So how can Arabs be anti-Semites?
Ms. Stern: Because of a lot of different things that happened over a long period of time. Basically we understand that the term today refers to the Jews, even though "the Semitic nations" include the Arabs as well.
Male Student: Shem?
Ms. Stern: *[slightly impatient]* Yes, from "Shem"--

There are clearly communicative aspects in this discussion that I will address; however, I would like to focus on the attempts to transact disciplinary knowledge. In five minutes of discussion, the following topics were mentioned: Jews, Russia, the nineteenth century, Western Europe, anti-Semitism, Semitic nations, Shem, Noah, Middle East, Arabs. We move from Eastern Europe to Western Europe to the Middle East, and from the nineteenth century to the time of the Bible in seconds, as the teacher tries to define anti-Semitism. She wants her students to acquire a basic definition of the concept and learn what it means etymologically while at the same time how to use it in the context of their history curriculum. While for the teacher the literal definition of the term is important as part of understanding the narrative presented in class (actually a multilevel narrative involving different kinds of hatred against Jews as well as a specific narrative of Jews in nineteenth- century Europe), the students when presented with this literal definition seem lost. The definition takes them far from the narratives the teacher would like to discuss, and they "cling" to the parts they don't understand or find intriguing, like the word "Semites," which makes no sense to some of them or the reference to Arabs, which they find confusing given the context.

The discussion quoted above exhibits communicative aspects across different disciplines, aspects that have been examined in research on classroom life (Jackson, 1968), classroom strategies (Holt, 1967), and classroom discourse (Cazden, 2001), for example, the teacher hoping her students would grasp what she's trying to say so that she can move on to another topic; the students trying to take clear notes in class so that they can do their homework and pass a test. While all of these aspects represent at once ways of passing along knowledge and power struggles in the classroom (Lemke, 1990), reasoning within the field of history has unique aspects which this paper will explore.

The teacher's attempt to give a general definition of the term "anti-Semitism" runs counter to several major forces at work in teaching and learning history. The first is students' experience with the concept in their own lives; the second is how different historical events, and the detailed narratives that form them, are unique, as opposed to generalizing them across time and space. In other words, students growing up in Jewish-Israeli culture are quite familiar with the term "anti-Semitism"; they bring into the classroom their own understanding of a modern "hatred of the Jews based on their Jewishness" which is so often mentioned in the news and in their education. Their own understanding is challenged by past historical events that share the same conceptual term but come from a period unknown to them, as well as by the term's literal definition, which some students have never before considered.

The confusion these students face when learning about a term like anti-Semitism (which is considered a concept in the curriculum) cannot be viewed as just the result of poor teaching or bad curriculum (though these can always be improved). Rather, it calls attention to the multiple linguistic layers and clashes between professional discipline, school goals, and student experience and interests, aspects which are apparent in every history classroom. While historians have tried to define anti-Semitism and filled countless books with their struggle to do so (Langmuir, 1990), the term's definition occupies only a few lines in a textbook and a few minutes of class time. This is not likely to change; the real question is how to manage it.

Learning history involves complex cognitive processes (Leinhardt, Stainton, & Virji, 1994). Some scholars have even argued that it is unnatural to think historically (Wineburg, 2001). Understanding the past can become even more complicated and charged in the classroom, given curricula and textbooks that all have a say in which topics to cover (or not) (Nash, Crabtree, & Dunn, 1997), in terminology that doesn't always explain topics well (McKeown & Beck, 1990), and where teachers and students bring to bear different historical knowledge and aims (Hallden, 1994). All of these factors play out in learning concepts in the history classroom. One of my goals is to show how the difficulties that arise in using concepts in the history classroom reflect the challenges of 'schooling history'—or any discipline, for that matter—challenges that must be resolved before they can be incorporated them into history studies.

This study investigates the challenges that concepts bring to the history classroom while addressing the following questions:
- What are 'concepts' in the history classroom?
- How do cognitive aspects involved in learning about the past (Lee & Ashby, 2000; Shemilt, 1983) and sociocultural aspects of studying culturally charged (Barton & McCully, 2005) and identity-charged (Seixas, 1994) historical topics in school play out in the learning of concepts?
- What kind of changes can be found in students' explanations of concepts once they have encountered them?

Potential significance of the work

This work claims that, first and foremost, we need to recognize the disjunction between how concepts are used in everyday life and in disciplinary history, and then understand the fundamental problem of generalizing within the discipline of history. This may be researched not only through experimental work but in daily classroom exchanges. It asks us to explore the epistemological and linguistic landscape of disciplinary reasoning in today's classroom. Second, it points out that the remedy occasionally cited in research on disciplinary reasoning in the

classroom, that difficulties in disciplinary understanding can be solved by changing the words used by textbooks or teachers, is too simplistic. Challenges such as learning historical concepts cannot be easily overcome; oftentimes the best that a teacher can do is manage them.

Theoretical and methodological approaches pursued

Data for this paper were drawn from a larger research program of a tenth-grade history classroom in Jerusalem, Israel. This research was done in the tradition of classroom ethnography (Schweber, 2004) focusing on disciplinary understanding (Wineburg & Wilson, 1988) and more specifically on the "transaction of subject matter in speech" in a history classroom with 'typical instruction.' During the course of an academic school year I observed and took notes and audio recorded all 42 history lessons across eight months of instruction. Recognizing that many forces are present in classroom life that can regulate as well as silence certain voices, the research was enhanced by the use of a questionnaire, interviews, and other methods not traditionally associated with linguistic ethnographies in the classroom. This was a single-site case study (Yin, 1994) and as such, not intended to be generalized to other populations, but rather meant to illuminate and theorize phenomena that occur in other settings.

Mixed methods were used both in collecting data and in analyzing them. I collected multiple sources of data that could shed light on how students learned the history content presented in class.

1."Pre" and "Post" Knowledge Questionnaire: A questionnaire was handed out to all the students in the class before instruction began, asking about the topics in the curriculum. The same questionnaire was given at the end of the school year.

2. Ethnography Observations: Over the course of the school year I observed the history class twice a week. I digitally tape-recorded all lessons while taking notes on student talk.

3. Semi-Structured Interviews: During the school year I conducted bimonthly interviews with a focus group of selected students whom I asked questions about the classroom discussions.

4."Artifacts of practice": I collected materials used by the teacher and students in class (what Ball and Cohen call "artifacts of practice" [(Ball & Cohen, 1999)] including the textbook, handouts, notebooks and tests.

The first stage of data analysis took place while collecting the data. Protocols of lessons and interviews were transcribed based on my notes and class recordings, and preliminary codes were generated, focusing on students' line of reasoning in the classroom discussions (Hallden, 1994b). All the students' questions and in-class remarks were analyzed, looking for patterns of responses to content knowledge, i.e., difficulty in understanding, engagement, personal identification, etc. The second stage of analyzing these patterns meant examining them in light of discourse theories on learning knowledge in classrooms, focusing on moment-to-moment interactions between the teacher and students and the students themselves (Lemke, 1990; Wortham, 2006), and drawing on theories of group and classroom argumentation, adapted to the exigencies of the history classroom (Pontecorvo, 1993; Schwarz, 2009).

Major findings, conclusions, and implications

Another example of confusion that arose in defining and discussing a concept in the history classroom involved the term "nationalism." Consider this excerpt from a class discussion:

Ms. Stern: What is nationalism? We're starting a new topic: nationalism. Please write this down [*as she writes on the board she is speaking slowly]*. Nationalism developed out of the French Revolution, which emphasized nationality—the nation, or the people—as the basis of the state and the regime *[finishes writing on the board]*. Before the French Revolution, who owned the country?

Students *[in unison]*: The king.

Ms. Stern: The king. The French Revolution basically highlights the idea that the basis for the state is not the king, but the state, the citizens of the state… What is this thing we call nationalism? Nationalism is a strong sense of belonging to the national group, the common denominator for all members of the nation and a political aspiration for independence of the nation. . . . Okay, let's try to understand. Finish copying, and let's try to understand what this nationalism thing is all about *[reads from the board the definition she just gave the students]:* A strong sense of belonging to the nation--what is the word that recurs?

Students *[in unison]*: Nation.

Ms. Stern: Nation. What is this thing called a nation? What is this group that people feel a part of?

Natan: A state.

Ms. Stern: No, the state relates to the ruler. What is a nation?

Shimi: A group of people.

Ms. Stern: A group of people who what?

Student: Who have something in common.

Ms. Stern: Something in common such as what? Let's try to take this apart: A nation, a group of people. But there are many groups of people. We're a group of people in this class. Are we a nation?

Students: Uh . . .

This excerpt illuminates aspects that surround the confusion caused by studying concepts in the history classroom. Unlike the case of anti-Semitism, here the teacher is trying to explain an abstract concept that is new and unfamiliar to the students. She tries to explain nationalism by walking them through a definition of the concept she has just given for the first time, drawing on their own knowledge and experience. Analyzed from the perspective of a transaction of content knowledge and ideas, and not as a criticism of her teaching methods, this example shows how students fail to follow the teacher's "line of reasoning" because they don't share her context or knowledge. More specifically, it shows how the attempt to explain a concept by exploring the students' experience (i.e., "We're a group of people in this class. Are we a nation?") doesn't help, because the notion of nationalism is too foreign and complicated—foreign in its origin, since most of the students were born and raised in the nation-state of Israel, making it difficult to imagine what it would be like to live in a pre-existing world, and extremely complicated because the country they live in is a nation state that doesn't exactly conform to the definition of nation and nationalism they are learning about (data not presented here shows how the latter caused a lot of confusion). This can be seen as an example of how cognitive challenges (grasping an abstract concept) intertwine with socio-cultural challenges of learning a concept in the history class (Jews in Israel can define their nationality as Jewish, Israeli or both)

Comparing pre- and post- student questionnaires in terms of concepts like anti-Semitism and nationalism showed that while students did learn new information, the concepts themselves remained fairly blurry ahistorical ideas. These findings reflect the other processes connected to learning history in school that are addressed in this work: students' prior knowledge, beliefs, and ideas about the concepts discussed in class, which can represent a clash between "official and unofficial history" (Tulviste & Wertsch, 1994), and the difference between schematic and specific narratives about the past (Wertsch, 2002). These students tended to stick to schematic narratives, which resemble ahistorical concepts (anti-Semitism equals hatred of the Jews); while mentioning the specific narratives they learned (as a modern phenomenon anti-Semitism differs from religious hatred, or that practiced in nineteenth-century Russia or France), they were not clear on how to connect the two.

This work suggests three major sources for the confusion caused by discussions of concepts in the history classroom: (1) the clash between professional and everyday meanings as used in history; (2) the clash between history as a discipline of the unique and the notion of generalization that underlies the social science disciplines; and (3) the clash between the endless and opened structure of historical narratives and the time-limited/stressful/test-oriented structure of classroom life.

Given the push toward using concepts in teaching history in Israel and around the world (especially with the rise of standard testing), a better understanding of the many factors involved in understanding general concepts in the historical context is crucial. These days little classroom time is spent learning historical narratives in detail; as a short version of complicated narratives, using concepts may seem an ideal solution. The problem comes when this kind of shortcut creates confusion both in the class and in the narratives students take away. This work examines this confusion and argues that it reflects the complex processes that are involved in both trying to understand the past and the teaching of it. As such, it cannot be solved either through teaching strategies or changing words in a textbook; rather, this is a challenge that can be managed only through careful attention and a concerted effort within the field of history education.

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