Exploring the concept of a 'historical gaze'[1]

Carol Bertram
School of Education and Development
Faculty of Education
University of KwaZulu-Natal

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to interrogate what makes history a specialised and particular discipline; to ask what does it mean to do history and to know history. I draw on the work of those working within the field of the sociology of knowledge, particularly the work of Dowling, to begin a discussion around the concept of an historical gaze. I argue that this concept may provide an analytic tool to help us to keep the inter-twined strands of procedural knowledge and substantive knowledge in history from unraveling and coming apart.

Introduction

I begin this paper with three examples of questions asked of history learners over the past three years.

In a Grade 10 textbook, there is a drawing labelled 'a drop of London water as seen by Punch magazine'. There is a task entitled "Stop and think. In South Africa water in rivers and dams has become contaminated. Has this happened in your community? What steps were taken to improve the situation? Ask your family whether they can tell you of such a situation. Find out what can be done to prevent the spread of germs in a water source."

From a test set for Grade 10 learners in 2006 in a well-resourced high school:

> "Imagine that you were having a discussion on life in the Industrial Revolution towns and cities. One of your class-mates says "If things were so bad, why didn't they just pack up and move back to the country-side?" How would you respond to this comment?

1 Paper presented at the South African Society Of History teaching Annual Conference, Cape Town, 26 and 27 September 2008. This is a discussion paper – please do not quote without author's permission.

Learners wrote things such as: you couldn't move back because you were too poor, because you couldn't find your way back; because you didn't have a map; because there were no jobs in the country. What the teacher wanted was the Acts of Enclosure meant that they no longer had land to move back to.

In a Department of Education exemplar paper, 2006, learners are given an excerpt from a diary written by a missionary in 1923 in the section on the Mfecane. The diary entry describes how homes had clearly been quickly abandoned; some were destroyed and even a child had been left behind. The question asked of learners is:

> 'The child was a mere skeleton, unable to stand from weakness'. Explain your response to this kind of child abuse.

The common question to ask about each of these, is why is this an historical question?

School knowledge and everyday knowledge

The South African curriculum is strong on integration, both between academic and everyday knowledge, and between disciplines. This means that the boundaries between 'school' knowledge and everyday knowledge have become more permeable, as have the boundaries between particular disciplines (Taylor, 1999). To use a concept developed by Bernstein, classification refers to the strength of the boundaries between objects (Bernstein, 1996). Thus the curriculum becomes weakly classified, as the boundaries between objects become weaker. The argument is that this makes knowledge more relevant, more accessible and easier to learn.

However, there are also a significant number of researchers working in the field of knowledge from a sociological perspective who argue that academic knowledge and everyday knowledge are differently structured and therefore, differently acquired (Dowling, 1998; Muller & Taylor, 2000). Much of this work has been in the field of mathematics (such as Adler, Pournara, & Graven, 2000), where it is perhaps easier to distinguish between mathematical knowledge and everyday knowledge. In history, perhaps the distinction is not that clear-cut. This then brings me to the focus of this paper, which is: what makes history a particular and specialised discipline? Is there such a thing as an 'historical gaze'?

To get to this, I am going to take a detour via mathematics education.

Mathematics and History

Paul Dowling (1998) describes four domains of mathematical discourse. Working with the concept of classification, he considers the strength of classification as varying according to two dimensions – classification of content and classification of mode of expression. This means that the content can either be strongly classified (ie. Easily recognisable as mathematical) or weakly classified (where content is not easily recognisable as mathematical). Mode of expression too can either be strongly classified (the language is unambiguously mathematical) or weakly classified (the language is relatively unspecialised or not strongly mathematical). What this means is that there are four domains of mathematical discourse, which are described below.

Table 1: Dowling's domains of mathematic discourse

(from Ensor and Galant, 2005; 292, adapted from Dowling, 1998)

	C+ **Mode of expression** **C-**	
C+	**Esoteric domain** (universe of highly specialised abstract mathematical statements) eg. Solve for *x:* 18*x*+92 =137	**Expressive domain** (universe of mathematical statements which are unambiguously mathematical in content, but are couched in relatively unspecialised language) e.g. Here is a machine chain. What is its output? 3 – x2-x8 →
C-	**Descriptive domain** (universe of mathematical statements which appear from the language in which they are couched to be mathematical, but where the content is not so.) e.g. A café orders p white loaves and q brown loaves every day for r days. What does the expression (p+q) r tell you?	**Public domain** (universe of statements which are not unambiguously mathematical, either in terms of the content that they refer to, or in the language which is used to do this) e.g. What is the bill for buying 1 kg of bananas at R7 per kilo and a bag of oranges at R10 per bag?

What Dowling (1995, 1998) concluded from his research of mathematical textbooks in the UK, is that excessive use of the public domain means

that learners are in fact not inducted into the speciality of the discipline of mathematics. Bernstein suggests that acquirers of any discipline develop a tacitly acquired 'gaze', which means that they learn how to 'recognise, regard, realise and evaluate legitimately the phenomena of concern' (1996: 170). Dowling believes that gaining mastery of the esoteric domain (where both content and mode of expression are clearly mathematical) equips one with a mathematical gaze with which one can look out upon the world, and the 'see' mathematics in it (Ensor & Galant, 2005).

So the question I want to debate is, can any of this be relevant for the discourse of history, which has a very different knowledge structure to mathematics?

Dean (2004) suggests that history is made up of two complementary, interlinked strands, which are content and process. She draws on Schwab (1978) who described these strands as (a) syntactic or procedural knowledge, which is knowledge about conducting historical enquiry or 'know-how' knowledge and (b) substantive or propositional knowledge which represents the statements of fact, propositions and concepts of history, which are constructed as a result of the procedural investigations carried out by historians.

History's specialty does not come from the vertical sequencing of its content into ever simplifying analytic abstractions (such as in the discipline of physics); rather its specialty comes from its mode of interrogation and the criteria for the construction of historical texts (Bertram, 2008). Historian John Tosh describes the work of the professional historian as opposed to popular 'social memory' like this:

> Professional historians insist on a lengthy immersion in the primary sources, a deliberate shedding of present-day assumptions and a rare degree of empathy and imagination. Popular historical knowledge, on the other hand, tends to a highly selective interest in the remains of the past, is shot through with present-day assumptions and is only incidentally concerned to understand the past on its own terms (2006: 12).

Tosh seems to be describing both procedural knowledge – that of a deep reading of primary sources, as well as a way of being and thinking. This is a historical gaze, which encompasses an ability to understand the past in its own context and to approach it with empathy and imagination.

Students and historical evidence

Wineburg's (2001) empirical work is to understand how historical thinking

really works by studying how students and historians interact with original historical evidence; how they come to understand history. He gave eight historians a set of documents about the Battle of Lexington and asked them to think aloud while they read these. He noticed how they comprehended a sub-text, 'a text of hidden and latent meanings' (p. 65). For the historians, even those not reading in their specialist area, '(T)he comprehension of the text reaches beyond words and phrases to embrace intention, motive, purpose and plan – the same set of concepts we use to decipher human action' (p. 67). When historians were asked to rank the relative trustworthiness of the documents, they ranked the excerpt from an American history textbook last.

Wineburg asked eight high achieving high school students to do the same task. Many of the students rated the textbook excerpt as the most trustworthy, failing 'to see the text as a social instrument skilfully crafted to achieve a social end' (p 69). The students also did not read the source of the document before reading the text; the text's attribution was not that important, whereas for the historians what is said is inseparable from who said it and under what circumstances. Wineburg surmises that one of the reasons these students had so little sense of how to read an historical text, is that textbook texts dominate the history classroom, and these are often written without any indication of judgement, interpretation or uncertainty (p 78).

Thus, there are certain procedures that inform what historians do, most notably linking any primary text to its author and the context in which it was written, reading the subtext of the document and understanding the text in its original context. Texts are seen as 'slippery, cagey, and protean, reflecting the uncertainty and disingenuity of the real world' (Wineburg, 2001: 66). This kind of in-depth reading of sources can only happen with an in-depth knowledge of the context and time in which they were written. Leinhardt (1994) shows that historians understand their work as holistically encompassing a deep engagement with primary sources and the use of this evidence to construct a convincing case. This gives us some understanding into what it means to do history or to think like an historian.

We could say that procedural knowledge or 'doing history' maps onto Dowling's 'mode of expression'. However, I think that 'mode of expression' can also be understood as knowing about the specialist ways in which history uses the language of time, chronology and explanations of cause and effect (Martin, 2007; Coffin, 2006). A deep knowledge of the context and time in which a source is written, together with a substantive knowledge of the propositional

knowledge accumulated by historians over many years, makes up the content domain. The substance of historical knowledge is to know what key events shaped the past, and how these events did so. It also means developing a sense of period, or an understanding of a particular era or human society (Dean, 2004), as well as an understanding that different people interpret historical events in different ways for different purposes.

A possible map from the discipline of History onto Dowling's domains can be done in the following way:

	C+ Mode of expression C-	
C+	**Esoteric domain** (content clearly historical, and language specialised and procedures specialised) e.g. Read two newspaper reports on the Boston Tea Party. Identify which side each source supports, identifying the bias in each source.	**Expressive domain** (unambiguously historical in content, but are couched in relatively unspecialised language) e.g. "why not move back to the countryside?"
Content **C-**	**Descriptive domain** (universe of historical statements which appear from the language in which they are couched, and the procedures to be historical, but where the content is not so.) e.g. 'child abuse' question	**Public domain** (universe of statements which are not unambiguously historical, either in terms of the content that they refer to, or in the language which is used to do this) e.g. Textbook example of water contamination

Domains for History from the Dowling structure

I would place an assessment question such as "Read two newspaper reports on the Boston Tea Party. Identify which side each source supports, identifying the bias in each source." Into the 'esoteric'domain. The question has both clearly historical content and specialised language and procedures because learners are required to engage with the sources in an historical way.

I place the question about "Why did people not move back to the country side?" in the domain of clear history content (the Industrial Revolution) but non-specialised language. Many of the learners did not recognise that this

question required a historical response, so they responded from their 'every day' knowledge viz. People did not know the way, or did not have a map to go back to the countryside.

I place the question about "Explain your response to this kind of child abuse" in the descriptive domain of weak historical knowledge, and specialised procedure. This is because learners are required to interrogate a source, so it appears to be an historical procedure. However, the question is asking learners to read the source from the perspective of the twenty-first century and human rights, rather than engaging 'a deliberate shedding of present-day assumptions' (Tosh, 2006), which is how historians would read such a source. There is no 'historical' knowledge drawn on here, rather learners asked for their own opinion on a relatively new construct 'child abuse'.

I place the task about interrogating water sanitation and contamination in the 'public' domain, which has neither historical content nor specialised language or procedure. The content is about water (which would appear to 'fit' into natural science or geography) and there are no specialised historical procedures required.

I suggest that these domains give us an analytic tool to interrogate the kinds of tasks that history learners are required to perform at school. I do not suggest that all school history tasks must be located in the 'esoteric' domain, since it is obviously important to make links with learners' everyday knowledge and knowledge of other subjects. And of course the purpose of school history in South Africa is not only to induct learners into the discipline, but also to support the principles of transformation, democracy, human rights and social justice (Department of Education, 2003). However, we should recognise the power of this domain to give learners mastery over both history content and mode of expression. When learners gain mastery over the esoteric domain, they will develop an historical gaze.

Conclusion

The FET National Curriculum Statement is strongly in favour of the procedural aspect of history, although it does not ignore the importance of substantive knowledge, which is clearly described. It is clear that "Learners who study history use the insights and skills of historians. They analyse sources and evidence and study different interpretations, divergent opinions and voices."(Department of Education, 2003; 10).

As we have seen the FET curriculum unfolding over the past three years, I think there is evidence to show that the curriculum's strong emphasis on doing history, on the cycle of enquiry and on source-based assessment can easily mean that not sufficient attention is being paid to substantive knowledge. Educators who themselves have a historical gaze are able to hold together the content and the procedural aspects. Educators, who do not have a strong historical gaze, easily slip into the technical requirements of 'covering' the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Standards in atomistic and fragmented ways. An analysis of a selection of Grade 10 assessment tasks from 2006 showed that many questions required very little historical knowledge to answer them, and that questions were not historical in procedure but merely comprehension questions. We see in many assessment tasks the form but not the substance of history enquiry (Bertram, 2008).

I suggest that the concept of an historical gaze may help us to keep focused on the importance of keeping the inter-twined strands of procedural knowledge and substantive knowledge from unraveling and coming apart.

Acknowledgements

These ideas are drawn from a PhD study on the recontextualisation of the Grade 10 South African History curriculum, which was partially funded by the National Research Foundation (Thuthuka grant No 61985).

References

J Adler, C Pournara & M Graven, (2000). Integration within and across mathematics. *Pythagoras, 52*, 2-13.

B Bernstein, (1996). *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity. Theory, research, critique*. London: Taylor Francis.

C Bertram, (2008). *Curriculum recontextualisation: a case study of the South African high school History curriculum.* University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

J Dean, (2004). Doing history: theory, practice and pedagogy. In S Jeppie (Ed.), *Toward new histories for South Africa: on the place of the past in our present*. Cape Town: Juta Gariep.

Department of Education. (2003). *National Curriculum Statement Grades 10 -12 (General) History*. Pretoria: Department of Education.

P Dowling, (1995). Discipline and mathematise: the myth of relevance in education. *Perspectives in Education, 16*(2), 209-226.

P Dowling, (1998). *The sociology of mathematics education: mathematical myths/ pedagogic texts.* London: Falmer.

P Ensor, & J Galant, (2005). Knowledge and pedagogy: sociological research in mathematics education in South Africa. In R Vithal, J Adler & C Keitel (Eds.), *Researching mathematics education in South Africa. Perspectives, practices and possibilities.* Pretoria: HSRC Press.

G Leinhardt, (1994). History: a time to be mindful. In G Leinhardt, IL Beck & C Stainton (Eds.), *Teaching and learning in history*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

J Muller, & N Taylor, (2000). Schooling and everyday life. In *Reclaiming knowledge: social theory, curriculum and education policy*. London: Routledge Falmer.

JJ Schwab, (1978). Knowledge and the structure of the disciplines. In I Westbury & N. J Wilkof (Eds.), *Science, curriculum and liberal education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

N Taylor, (1999). Curriculum 2005: Finding a balance between school and everyday knowledges. In N Taylor & P Vinjevold (Eds.), *Getting learning right. Report of the President's Education Initiative Research Project.* Johannesburg: The Joint Education Trust.

J Tosh, (2006). *The pursuit of history. Aims, methods and new directions in the study of modern history* (Fourth ed.). Harlow: Pearson Longman.

S Wineburg, (2001). *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts. Charting the future of teaching the past.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.