

The Pedagogy of Subversion in History Education in Conflict-ridden Areas

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In his seminal essay, *The Use and Disadvantage of History for Life*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes: "...If, on the other hand, you live yourselves into the history of great men you will learn from it a highest commandment, to become ripe and to flee from that paralyzing educational constraint of the age, which see its advantage in preventing your becoming ripe, in order to rule and to exploit you unripe ones". (Nietzsche 1980 [1874], p.38)

Bearing this in mind, I would like to suggest a new way to teach history. My approach maintains that the application of pedagogy of subversion in history education can foster in teenagers intellectual self-confidence, critical thinking and perhaps even tolerance towards views that may be different from their own. The future use of these capabilities, I believe, is the ultimate aim of education towards democratic citizenship.

In democratic countries, history education is perceived as open and critical, despite the fact that this education per se does not guarantee democracy. Some researchers even believe that its role is not to educate to democratic citizenship (Lee 2010, xi–xvi).

I, however, take the view that education to democratic citizenship must be based on observations backed by historical background:

First, because democracy was born out of an historical reality; therefore, it is only from a perspective of historical understanding that we can truly comprehend it.

Second, because history is a story about real people, especially about what people did to other people, young students need to understand that the decisions and actions of today are the history of tomorrow. They must be given the intellectual resources that will enable them to observe the narratives of the past and the reality of the present from different perspectives, and be aware of their objectives and limitations.

Unfortunately there is no democracy gene and I'm afraid that in a postmodern society, in which the leading political and social forces have become so evasive and sometimes quite powerful, there is danger that the younger generation will grow up without any political or social orientation at all. The absence of political language and tools for political conduct in young people can engender violence, racism, radical nationalism and ruthless fundamentalism. The problem is that the political - critical dimension is not included the schools' program, and the unfortunate outcome of that reality is: political illiteracy and misunderstanding of the function of politics within society. This is what we are currently witnessing in the Middle East today. The Facebook calls young people out into the streets but they do not know how to deal with this.

Why is it so important to strengthen the political-critical dimension in history teaching, in conflict-ridden areas?

Because, there's a widespread tendency among politicians to employ history education to advance their own interests and agendas; and because, in situations of prolonged conflict, there is a tendency to intensify the national or the community story at the expense of the critical dimension. Each side argues for its own historical truth, and confuses historical research by negating the narrative of the other. The instrumental and ungoverned use of history is likely to be problematic and later on even dangerous. The use of half-truths or fabrications, which are usually one-sided, can be easily misleading. To deal with this phenomenon we need to enhance the ability of young

people to cope with politicians making cynical use of the historical narrative (Yogeve 2013).

Challenging the students' conventional perceptions and strengthening their political-moral thinking.

In an important book about the consolidation of historical consciousness among young students, the Canadian researcher Peter Seixas defines historical consciousness as “the area in which collective memory, the writing of history and other modes of shaping images of the past in the public mind, merge” (Seixas 2004, p. 10). According to this approach, school education, historical research and public history are not different spheres. In the above-mentioned illuminating collection of articles edited by Seixas, Jörn Rüsen proposes conceptualising effective historical consciousness as a synthesis of the search for a humane life orientation combined with an understanding of the dimension of the change in time (Rüsen 2004, pp. 66–67). Built into it is an action that results in a commitment to taking a stand towards the world.

In his book *Truth and Method*, the German existentialist philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer uses the term “effective historical consciousness” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) (Gadamer 1999 [1960], pp. 299–302). The essence of an “effective historical consciousness” is then a movement of the consciousness from the present to the past and back. Understanding the dimension of historical change is related primarily to understanding the dynamic of normative perceptions. This type of learning dwells on questions of how perceptions change over time and take on new meanings, such as: what is worthy and what is unworthy, just or unjust, permitted or forbidden, etc. Historical consciousness is then always the product of social framing within a certain context, and by the very posing of these questions, seeks a kind of historical justice in the actions of humanity. The effective historical consciousness demands that the historian or student of history be very much aware of the contextuality in which their understanding occurs (Gadamer 1999 [1960], pp. 374–375), and from this perspective, the observation of the historical story will raise questions, such as what the story tells them about their own lives, how they understand it and why it is meaningful for them.

If the study of history is not relevant to the learners and ignores the intensity of the media and the other spheres of public history, the practices of teaching history will always suffer from a paradigmatic failure. The learners will not understand that the history of the past was once the present and that the decisions and actions of today will be history in the future.

The role of history education is to identify an interaction between making sense of the past and constructing expectations for the future. In conflict ridden areas developing a consciousness of sober conciliation is an important goal too.

Based on those assumptions I propose the implementation of pedagogy of subversion in history teaching practices. Seeking to unsettle the students' mind and ignite their intellect, this pedagogy supports **the strengthening of political-moral thinking** through the use of particular history content and teaching practices that take into account youthful rebellion and typical juvenile desire to fix the world. Adolescent

resistance to education can thus be harnessed as a tool, providing an object for the student to contend with personally as part of his or her maturation and individuation process. The desired outcome of such pedagogical practices is the development of an effective historical consciousness that enhances independent thinking and reflective skills. The teaching of history that combines analytical observation of the historian's works with a sensitive intercultural dialogue is likely to heighten the ability of young people to cope with politicians making cynical use of the historical narrative for their own immediate benefit. We have to strengthen the intellectual ability of the students if we want to liberate them from such historical education.

In order to understand how the political-critical dimension in history education can strengthen the individual's independent thinking, I propose viewing the adjective "**political**" as a term distinct from **politics**. That is to say, we should view it as the desire to ask questions regarding the boundaries of the political sphere. The protest of the **political** will expose the authority's problems as being in need of correction, and may even demand that it identify itself politically. The actions of those who claim the status of "political-critical" are always a subversion of those who make use of political apparatuses for their own benefit (Yogev 2013)

History education that seeks to strengthen its dimension of subversion should foster the ability among students of history to contextualise the historical story. The political-critical challenge is inherent in every academic discussion in a history text, like a shadow that challenges emotional manipulations or hasty conclusions that create a new meta-narrative. The students of history will express productive suspiciousness towards every historic description and will be prepared to challenge the self-evident, as they constantly test the validity of their own judgments too.

Jörn Rüsen presents the strengthening of narrative competence among students of history as a crucial lesson in social ethics (2004, pp. 69–70). In his view, "Historical learning can be explained as a process of structural change in historical consciousness" (Rusen 2004, p. 81). Rüsen seems to regard the informal encounters with memories as compatible with a structured process directed towards a structural change in cognition.

Hans-Georg Gadamer emphasises the intention of understanding a different historical narrative as the intertwining of a cognitive understanding with an ethical position. The intent to understand essentially means attending to the language of human existence. The assumption underpinning this position states that humanity has its own language, common to all people. As such, it presents them with similar experiences, situations and problems. The authentic observation resulting from openness and intent to understand is not about "is our understanding correct or incorrect", but about "what to do following our understanding", assuming it will always be a partial understanding, part of a dynamic, changing and sometimes-elusive process (Gadamer 1999 [1960], pp. 299–307, 358–60). In other words, Gadamer proposes looking for a "human truth". He prefers it to the search for a seeming total "historical truth", and expects the student of history to be aware of himself or herself and attentive to others. This will make his understanding of history more complex.

At this stage, we can sum up and say that the fostering of a mature historical awareness and consciousness among students requires a reasonable and logical

measure of connection between curricular thinking and the historian's thinking (the search for “historical truth”), alongside profound insights into the political (deciphering interests and hegemonic ideological forces) and the ethical dimension of the historical story (tolerant attentiveness to the “human truth”). This approach may be able to inject optimism and hope into the act of education. The use of these three directions as combined tools throughout all the years of the study of history can help students develop a deeper understanding of how people take responsibility for shaping their present and future – a present that in the future will become history.

The pedagogy of subversion in history education – possible practices

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the political-critical dimension in history education in practice, I propose four teaching practices, practices that are suited to the older high school classes.

1. An encounter with immediate life materials – teaching the first basics of historical thinking;
2. The deciphering of an enigma – the search for “historical truth”;
3. the historicisation of a constitutive narrative¹ and legendary figures;
4. A meeting with a narrative “Rashomon” – the “human truth.”

1. Teaching the first basics of historical thinking

First, we should focus on strengthening the students’ basic understanding of history as an event that took place in reality; that the discipline of history is interpretive in nature and that historical knowledge is constantly developing. This goal is illustrated by dealing with the students’ family history (Seixes and Peck 2004, p. 115). The students are asked to draw a diagram of some important events in their family history and explain why they chose these particular events. Then they write a brief autobiographical text into which the events will be embedded. Later, they ask another member of their family to do the same exercise.

A comparison of the results will enable the students to see if their family member chose the same events, and if not, why. It is reasonable to assume that a number of differences will be found in the choices. In light of this, the students are then asked to discuss about the two versions in regards to the similarities and differences in the description of the event.

This method will illustrate to the students that history is interpretive in nature which makes for a multitude of narratives.

2. Becoming familiar with the historian’s toolbox

The second stage of study focuses on becoming familiar with the historian’s toolbox. Here we will explore how historical knowledge is constructed from parts of

¹ A constitutive narrative tells the story of the foundation of a nation or a community. The narrative functions as mythological story.

information coming from varied sources, and how this information is validated. It is important to emphasize that this is not an academic style of study, but rather that students are given a fascinating yet enigmatic story, the deciphering of which can awaken their motivation to discover and decipher more.

An example of a teaching structure of this kind could be achieved by research into the history of Easter Island in the Pacific Ocean or even the enigmatic story of Stonehenge. The research into these enigmatic phenomena will expose the students to the question of the reliability of primary sources, in particular the pictures of the statues and maps of the island. The students hypothesize and look for information in order to construct a reasonable and consistent story to explain what happened on the island.

It's important to note that strengthening the “political-critical” dimension in this type of learning is attained first of all by shattering the familiar way of a learning process that brings a finished story to the classroom. Here the students experience the thinking process of the historian as an explorer and interpretive. They will have to validate the story with the evidence they find and construct a logical descriptive skeleton.

3. History analysis of a constitutive narrative and legendary figures

The third method devotes quality time to the rational treatment of prejudgments, significant legends and mythological figures – or misconceptions acquired at earlier ages. Here, the emphasis is placed mainly on the active and activating role of the collective and particular memory in the social life of the individual, and on the role of historicisation processes, as illustrating a way to leave prejudgments behind, replacing them with better knowledge and historical understanding.

Here, the emphasis is placed mainly on the active and activating role of the collective and particular memory in the social life of the individual, and the historical analysis processes as illustrating a way to leave prejudgments behind, to be replaced with better knowledge and historical understanding.

Every country has its own legends and heroes. The legends fade away on their own when they're no longer needed, but remained engraved on the nation's collective memory. A discussion can be held in the class about a legend that has already faded away and the research will present the historical knowledge surrounding it. The State of Israel, for example, like every other country, has legends of this nature. A key legend is the story of Joseph Trumpeldor, a fighter who fell in a battle for the Galilee in the early 20th century. As legend has it, Trumpeldor said before dying in battle: “It is good to die for our country.” The story became a key legend in the 1940s-1960s. Poems and songs were written about it, a memorial with a statue of a roaring lion was built in his memory, and it became a site visited by schoolchildren and teens. Furthermore, a day commemorating Trumpeldor was introduced into the official school curriculum. Today, the strength of that legend has faded. The teacher will transition the focus of the lesson to the matter of the active role of the key story. Questions such as these should be asked: How was this key story created in the eyes of the central figures of the period? Why was it necessary in its time? How did the later generations use it and why?

Perhaps I should explain here, that in the forties and fifties the state of Israel felt weak and insecure after the Holocaust trauma and the Independent war, which was a bloody war, and therefore needed a myth of heroism and sacrifice. This feeling changed with Israel's unexpected victory in the 1967 war, after which Israeli society felt much safer and secure. As it was no longer needed, the myth dissolved itself.

4. A meeting with a narrative-like “Rashomon”

The fourth method, and the most complicated one, is a meeting with a *Rashomon*-like narrative. I believe that if the encounter with the conflicting narratives is managed properly, it can contribute to the development of more complex thinking among learners. The teaching process will present to the class the conflicting narratives derived from the hard facts on which there's agreement, and focus the discussion on the tension between them.

A good example of this practice is the joint project of Israeli and Palestinian high school teachers of PRIME institute (Prime is: The Peace Research Institute in the Middle East sponsor by the Germans). These history teachers worked together to create a teaching booklet on the Arab-Israeli conflict, made up of three columns. One column shows the Palestinian narrative, while a second one shows the Israeli narrative of those same events. The center column is left blank where the student can make personal notes, ask questions and write new insights, etc (Bar-On and Adwan 2009). The discussions in class concentrate on the meanings ascribed to the different narratives and feelings of injustice, anxiety and anger engendered by them. These discussions examine the language they use and attempt to understand the historical context in which they were formed. The learner knows that he can examine it, accept it fully or have reservations about it. But first and foremost - he might understand the function of the historical narrative for the person telling it, and why it's so important to him or to her.

I am not saying that this is an easy task. It is a Sisyphean, day-to-day activity. But I believe that if teachers acquire an attitude committing them to this kind of teaching, they will find the way.

Conclusion

The political education system tends to justify the role of history education in that it builds identity that cements the foundations of the community, nation and society. This is indeed a very valuable role. However, the argument presented in this paper emphasizes the need to foster an effective historical consciousness as a vital subversive resource to empower autonomous thinking among young people. This position in no way seeks to sweepingly reject political steps taken by the government, but rather to claim that the very existence and fostering of this type of thinking are essential to the existence of a democratic society. Autonomous thinking does not develop on its own. In order to foster its development, teachers must gain an in-depth understanding of the characteristics of the field in which they are working and a willingness to contend with the challenges that history education presents.

A further important question relates to the perception of the education system as a locale for advancing tools of democratic citizenship, and the inculcation of human

values of partnership in public life. Nurturing the political identity of students at any age is a prerequisite for forming the foundations of civic republicanism in them, and for the future realisation of democratic citizenship. The problem is that the education system usually avoids touching upon social and political issues and generally adopts a stance of ostensible neutrality, which is acquired at the cost of separation between social critique and educational endeavor.

Back to Friedrich Nietzsche in his seminal essay: "*The advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*" (Nietzsche 1980 [1874], p. 30), I would say that the essence of the maturation and initial exploitation of the application of the pedagogy of subversion in history education will then be the intellectual strengthening and the ability of the young students to liberate themselves from the politicisation of history education.

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