

## **On the significance of doing philosophy in the history classroom:**

### **A theoretical and practical engagement with historical consciousness**

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#### **Abstract**

This article offers an exploration of how the teaching and learning of philosophy and history may go forward together in the future. This comes at a time when both disciplines are undergoing considerable challenges in making themselves meaningful in school curriculums, albeit for different purposes. Whilst school philosophy has implicitly been considered a necessary feature of school curriculums by way of teachers addressing topics such as logic and ethics, the explicit teaching of philosophy itself has gone begging because the benefits of doing so have not been proven to be self-evident for curriculum writers (Hand 2018a). On the contrary, school history has consistently maintained itself as a subject that must be learnt by students, but the teaching and learning of the subject has undergone significant pedagogical reform since history educationalists have introduced and revised the ideas of historical thinking within history curriculum. Whilst philosophers have begun to form a more definitive pedagogical approach towards how they should teach philosophy, they are now concerning themselves with the policymaker's question of *why* they should be teaching it. In contrast, historians are still at a crossroads as to *how* they should be teaching history but are still assured that they should be in the first place. Accordingly, this article will explore how both disciplines can answer their respective questions by unpacking the concept of 'historical consciousness'. In doing so, it will make a more direct case as to why philosophy should be explicitly taught in schools as it provides a framework for students to engage with philosophical ideas and skills that are essential to the encountering and exploration of a student's historical consciousness within the school history classroom.

#### **Key Words**

CoI, doing, historical consciousness, historical thinking, historical reasoning

### **A brief history of historical thinking and reasoning**

In *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, John Tosh and Seán Lang (2006) outline the two traditional approaches to writing history. According to them, history can be written from two mutually exclusive positions: positivist, which records history in a scientific manner by emphasising the use of and need for empirical evidence, and, second, idealist, which records history by drawing on the subjective complexities of the human condition and the emotions that often characterise it. The existence of these two distinct traditions has resulted in ongoing debates amongst historians as to who is recording the most accurate and truthful account of the past. Although most opinions, as Tosh and Lang suggest, tend to agree with positivists that history is a discipline of accumulating evidence, there is no doubting the role of the social in a social science such as history.

This debate is not exclusive to the history community and has found a prominent place amongst philosophers and most recently postmodernists (Tarnas 2010). Finding their own historical origins in Friedrich Nietzsche's (2008) idea of 'the will to power', many postmodernist critiques of history have argued that the discipline is mere wordplay for someone who wishes to focus a lens on a particular time, place, person or event for the sole purposes of expressing ideas or assumptions that they believe are true with the expectation that their audience will assume these to be true also. For the greater part of the twentieth century postmodernists such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault have posited this argument by claiming that history does not provide 'a window on the world but a structure that determines our perception of the world' (Tosh & Lang 2006, p.194) and is merely a tool used by the powerful to claim mastery over the social, political, economic and cultural substructures of any given civilisation. Of greatest concern for many of these theorists was the potential long-term consequences of this historicism and how it could continue to create a false perception of the world.

Since then one of the greatest adopters of this postmodern critique has been Howard Zinn (1980) with his publication of *A People's History of the United States*. Amidst an era of postmodern criticism Zinn, a poor Jewish immigrant who experienced World War II as a bombardier and struggled in American society during the twentieth century, published *A People's History* to remind readers of the historically significant people who helped create the United States of America from 'the bottom up' (p.10). The text emphasises the actions of those who were of a lower social, economic and political status such as African Americans, immigrants and women to ultimately become 'a

brilliant and moving history of the American people from the point of view of those... whose plight has been largely omitted from most histories' (ZEP 2019a). According to Anthony Arnove (1999), Zinn fundamentally changed the way people thought about history not only in the context of America but in a wider sense as well. With its chronological breadth spanning the years 1400 to 1980 (and, in later editions, 2001), the text (still) provides readers with an interpretation that attempts to correct 'the narratives of progress dispensed by the state' (Wineburg 2018, p. 52).

Building on this the Zinn Education Project (ZEP), launched in 2008, partnered with organisations such as Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change with the purpose of equipping students 'with the analytical tools to make sense of and improve the world today' (ZEP 2019b). The ZEP has subsequently provided free, downloadable lessons and articles for a range of grade levels that focus on the themes and time periods presented in *A People's History* by using the historical methodology of the text as their foundation. Ultimately, Zinn championed the postmodernist analysis of history claiming that the ZEP understands that 'anyone reading history should understand from the start that there is no such thing as impartial history' (Zinn, in ZEP 2019c), hence the need for *A People's History* as it flips the script so that students can become equipped with a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of America's history. This mission has caused *A People's History* to become essential reading in schools and universities alike.

However, whilst Zinn's academic achievements and moral endeavours have been applauded by his colleagues, the recent deconstruction of the text by Sam Wineburg (2018) has highlighted many significant issues from an educationalist perspective. In *Why Learn History (When It's Already on Your Phone)*, Wineburg agrees with commentators that Zinn's work has been important for the American nation because of how it has brought balance to the narrative. But he also believes that *A People's History* is the equivalent to 'propagandist slop' (p. 77).

Quick to note that the problem is not with the 'why' but the 'how' of Zinn's work, Wineburg outlines that this history is not as far from being a state approved textbook as some believe it to be, stating:

... *A People's History* is closer to students' state-approved texts than its advocates are wont to admit. Like traditional textbooks, *A People's History* relies almost entirely on secondary sources, with no archival research to thicken its narrative. Like traditional textbooks, the book is naked of footnotes, thwarting inquisitive readers who seek to retrace the author's interpretative steps. And,

like students' textbooks, when *A People's History* draws on primary sources, these documents serve to prop up the main text but never provide an alternative view or open a new field of vision. (p. 52)

Wineburg's analysis of Zinn is a product of his concern for what is called 'historical thinking', and more specifically, the skills associated with this mode of thinking that have become a focus in history education since, again, postmodernists challenged the discipline's methodologies.

Though historical thinking has been discussed at length within the field of history education for almost half a century now, the term has developed greater significance following a research report published by Canada's National Research Council (NRC 2005). The report, which evaluated how students learn history, argued that because students have preconceptions about how the world works it is imperative to develop competency in inquiry skills that are supported upon: (1) a deep factual knowledge of the inquiry subject, (2) a conceptual understanding of the facts and ideas that would help establish a context for the inquiry, and (3) a way in which the person undertaking the inquiry can organise, retrieve and apply knowledge, such as using a common language between those participating in the inquiry itself. Accordingly, the University of British Columbia's Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness (CSHC) established its 'historical thinking project' in 2006 which was chaired by renowned history educationalist Peter Seixas (1996) and built upon the debates between 'studying school history' from 'doing school history'.

Since then the concept of doing history has evolved and remained contested, but as Ruth W Sandwell (2019) has most recently suggested, the one agreed upon characteristic amongst historians and educationalists is that the activity requires students to not only look at the past but take into consideration *how* the past is being looked at. Accordingly the CSHC, Seixas and Peck (2004) and Seixas (2006) claimed that to do history people must engage with six distinct yet interrelated historical thinking concepts, these being: (1) establishing *historical significance*, (2) using *primary source evidence*, (3) identifying *continuity and change*, (4) analysing *cause and consequence/effect*, (5) taking *historical perspectives*, and (6) understanding *ethical dimensions* of history. The CSHC argued that the use of such historical concepts allowed anyone to 'assess the legitimacy of claims' and 'detect the differences' between 'the uses and abuses of history' (CSHC 2018a).

Today this language for explaining how we confront 'presentations of the past' (Seixas 1996, p. 767) provides a scope and sequence for school students in the history

classroom and is significant towards transitioning them from historical thinking to historical reasoning, this being a multimodal process of asking historical questions, contextualisation and argumentation (van Drie & van Boxtrel 2008). Historical questions such as 'why is this story important to me?', 'should I believe it?', 'on what ground?' and 'what evidence do we have?' (Lévesque 2014) are all (but not the only) indications that students have begun to undertake a degree of historical thinking and reasoning, the results of which demonstrate an understanding of how the past is being looked at by either the primary perspective or secondary interpretation that is being analysed as evidence. These are signs of doing history.

It is in this way that *A People's History* and the ZEP is ironically a very suitable teaching and learning resource for students today, despite Wineburg's criticisms of the former as a piece of historical knowledge. With the aid of historical thinking and reasoning skills, students may unpack Zinn's work like Wineburg has and can subsequently pose inquiry questions that challenge the claims about how the world works that are discussed in the text.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, though teachers should not exclusively use a text such as Zinn's to educate students about the past, they should endeavour to use it to help the development of historical thinking and reasoning in their students as explained thus far.

Recent debates on the historical method have thus resulted in a number of initiatives being undertaken but none are more significant than those of history educationalists, specifically Wineburg and Seixas. Acknowledging the need for pedagogies that directly help students learn history in the manner that the NRC noted, these educationalists have assisted students with the development of their historical thinking and reasoning, as well as their analysis and inquiry skills which are arguably unable to be learnt from a textbook (but could be applied to one). Accordingly, a student's encounter with history has become one that may not only discuss what has been written, but how it has been written in an attempt to find meaning from the multiplicity of primary perspectives and historical interpretations.

## Historical consciousness

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<sup>1</sup> This is also dependent on whether the history teacher has approached Zinn like Wineburg. If the teacher has assumed the perspective that Zinn's work is historically sound, then the ability for students to engage with the text in the manner I have outlined is questionable. The use of a Community of Inquiry, as I will explain, may resolve this issue because it places the learning in the control of the student.

With the advent of historical thinking and reasoning, the concept of 'historical consciousness' has also become a focus for historians and educationalists alike. This term explains that with the use of historical thinking and reasoning there will be questions raised, such as: (1) 'what do individuals and collectives *believe*, and what do they *know*, about the past?', (2) 'how has the world been structured with the use of these beliefs and this knowledge, and how has that shaped my understanding of the past?', and (3) 'how does my knowledge of these structures relate to my understanding and thinking about the present and the future?' (Seixas & Peck 2004). These questions begin to explain why Wineburg (2001) labelled historical thinking as fundamentally an 'unnatural act'. As Tyson Retz (2015) explains, whilst historical thinking can be understood pedagogically as a method for analysing historical writing, it can also result in 'the thinker' becoming simultaneously connected and disconnected to their temporal self to the extent that they engage with themselves phenomenologically.

Such an encounter with the concept of a historical consciousness was situated at the heart of Martin Heidegger's (1962) phenomenological inquiry, *Being and Time*. When attempting to better understand the phenomena of experience and consciousness, Heidegger claimed that it was necessary to rid his inquiry of any presuppositions to prevent him from placing significance on any one detail he encountered. As Heidegger explained, this is difficult because the task of understanding the meaning of a phenomena like 'Being', 'existence' or 'consciousness' required whomever was inquiring to posit themselves both inside and outside a realm of understanding. This meant that the interpretations of whomever was inquiring must be used to help guide the inquiry process, but they must be questioned also.

If students use historical thinking and reasoning skills then this phenomenological, 'unnatural act' is to be expected to eventually take place in the form of an encounter with their historical consciousness. But whilst some educationalists would disagree that an individual's historical consciousness is significant for a student's interpretation and knowledge of historical phenomena (van Drie & van Boxtrel 2008), the questions posed by Seixas imply otherwise. Accordingly, if the aforementioned questions are raised, history educationalists must consider the following: can historical thinking and reasoning skills assist students who begin asking questions that are of a phenomenological, or more fundamentally, a philosophical nature? How can these skills actively assist a student who begins to encounter their historical consciousness in a bid to understand themselves in the world? Are these skills able to sustain lines of inquiry that foster questions of 'being' itself?

Such questions are significant for the ongoing implementation and development of historical thinking and reasoning for students and teachers alike. But as a consequence of using historical thinking and reasoning skills, there is now a greater need for pedagogies that support the philosophical lines of thinking and reasoning that students are engaging with. Therefore, whilst the advent of new historical pedagogies has brought with it better frameworks for writing and analysing history, there needs to be an assessment of the pedagogies available to assist with a student's thinking, reasoning and understanding of both the concepts of consciousness and historical consciousness, as well as their own personal historical consciousness and the associated philosophical concepts and ideas that are resultant of such understandings.

Although there has been work done on understanding a student's historical consciousness within the history educationalist community by Von Borries (1997), Rüsen (2006), Körber (2017) and Allender et al. (2019), the belief that a student's historical consciousness is a one of their 'general abilities' (van Drie & van Boxtrel 2008, p. 88) downplays the significance of this trait in being able to do school history. As Lévesque has stated, the result of historical thinking and reasoning should be 'an educated citizenry capable of orienting themselves in time with critical, usable narrative visions of their world' (para 5). This claim identifies that school history is responsible for educating students in a manner that projects them beyond the classroom by connecting them with primary perspectives and historical interpretations inside the classroom to contextualise the world outside of it.

Therefore, whilst historical thinking can account for the examination of what is, as Heidegger called it, 'ready-to-hand' such as the historical source evidence, it struggles to project itself beyond this into a realm of what is 'present-at-hand', this being 'the democracy of cultures' (VanSledright 2004, p. 230) or what exists outside the school classroom. This is not to discount the significance of an analytical framework such as concept-based historical thinking and reasoning, but there is a clear distinction between inquiry for the purposes of historical understanding and knowledge and inquiry for the purposes of historical consciousness. Whilst the former is grounded in the discussion of historical sources and is framed using historical thinking for the purposes of narrative and time, the latter is grounded in the outcomes of said historical thinking and finds students engage in inquiries focussed on discovering truth, not only in respect to the primary perspectives or historical interpretations of the sources, but their encounter of a world that extends beyond the classroom curriculum also. It is in this way that if a greater emphasis was put on philosophical inquiry within the history classroom then there may be more opportunities to do

history in a manner that not only maps a student's future, but school history's future too.

### **The role of philosophy and Community of Inquiry in history classrooms**

In 2018 Mark McKenna, one of Australia's leading historians, published his essay *Moment of Truth: History and Australia's Future*. The essay examines how the nation is experiencing an existential crisis caused by the existence of two coexisting histories, these being the colonial and the Indigenous, and what McKenna claims is the ongoing denial of the latter demonstrated by the observance of 'Australia Day' on 26 January every year.

Though its origins and meaning have been contested (Creative Spirits 2019), the day is widely acknowledged as an event celebrating the arrival of Captain Arthur Phillip to New South Wales and the effective founding of Australia in 1788. Accordingly, this day has become a topic of debate because it has been deemed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as a celebration of 'the coming of one race at the expense of another' (ABC 2013). New names for the day such as 'Invasion Day', 'Day of Mourning', 'Survival Day' and 'Aboriginal Sovereignty Day' have been offered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their supporters as a protest to the day, having subsequently called for the day to be moved to another date such as 1 January (marking the day of Australia's Federation in 1901) or 25 April (a day of remembrance of those Australians and New Zealanders who served and died in all wars and conflicts, known as ANZAC day). 'Australia', Aboriginal activist and lawyer Michael Mansell (2013) has claimed, 'is the only country that relies on the arrival of Europeans on its shores as being so significant it should herald the official national day'.

The 'moment of truth', as McKenna (2018) suggests in his title, is thus a moment for each Australian, regardless of origin, to consider how Australia's 'history will always challenge and unsettle' (p. 73) citizens and to 'learn how to use it to strengthen the ties that bind' (p. 74) them together. He offers two solutions to his readers:

We either *make* the Commonwealth stronger and more complete through an honest reckoning with the past, allowing the 'ancient sovereignty' of Indigenous Australia to 'shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood,' or we *unmake* the nation by clinging to triumphant narratives in



which the violence inherent in the nation's foundation is trivialised, and retreat once more into the old 'attitudes that helped us to conquer and settle the country'. (p. 73, emphasis in original)

Whilst McKenna acknowledges that the history of the nation is a complex and tragic one, he fundamentally believes that all Australians need to become cognisant of how the coexisting histories of both the Indigenous and colonial people will continue to map the future of the country even if these complexities and tragedies are not dealt with. 'After nearly fifty years of deeply divisive debates over the country's foundation', McKenna writes, 'Australia stands at a crossroads — a moment of truth'. (2018, p. 73).

'Truth', Susan T Gardner (1996) argues, 'is absolutely essential' to doing philosophy because it is only 'progress toward truth that participants are ultimately convinced of' (p. 41). An identical claim can be made in regards to history; when considered in its most primordial state, the act of doing history looks towards revealing truth about the past. Although there are many competing perspectives and interpretations of the past, both sides, as illustrated by McKenna and the ongoing Australia Day debate, claim to be truthful. Therefore, if the purpose of doing history—as it has been widely agreed upon by educationalists—is to understand *how* the past is being looked at, its ultimate goal is to discover the truth of the past as documented by source evidence.<sup>2</sup>

This understanding transforms school history from being that of an analysis of the past to being an analysis of the future too; but as this article has argued, an analysis of the past with the use of historical thinking and reasoning can only project a student so far into the future to consider and apply McKenna's 'moment of truth' to both their own and the collective worldviews. In addition to being aware of how McKenna has presented the history, students also need to be aware of how their own historical consciousness has structured their being as a citizen and their orientation towards McKenna's argument itself. Only with this can students actually do history in the sense that this paper has argued: they can actually understand how the history is being

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<sup>2</sup> It is critical to note that the notion of 'truth' is being used within this context to highlight the notion of progress rather than what is and is not true *per se*. Insofar as both Gardner and McKenna make references to truth, these are discussed in two manners. It is McKenna's notion—that Australians will progress by becoming enlightened to the 'truth' about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history—that is to be understood by the similar use of the term truth in this discussion. The reference made to Gardner has been used to connect the two disciplines of history and philosophy, albeit the discussion of truth itself will continue to be had for the purposes of highlighting a student's desire to progress into the future with an enlightened understanding of the past.

written and then apply and respond to it within their mode of being in the world itself. This task, as Heidegger's work suggested, is equally philosophical as it is historical.

Therefore, the future of school history is in need of philosophical pedagogies that will help students apply their ready-to-hand historical thinking and reasoning to their present-at-hand historical consciousness. Similarly to history educationalists like Seixas and Wineburg, Matthew Lipman (1996) has been largely responsible for providing a pedagogical vision for the philosophy classroom with his introduction of the 'Community of Inquiry' (CoI), making the act of doing philosophy 'clear, practical and specific' (p. 64). In *Philosophy goes to School*, Lipman (1988) argued that the CoI was a twofold process that required, firstly, a logical and scientific method of thinking that was demonstrated by the active use of evidence to support reasoning, and secondly, the building upon ideas by students for the purposes of representing points of view and asking questions, both of which aim to move the inquiry beyond mere contemplative conversation. With an emphasis placed upon these, the outcome of a CoI becomes a question of how the participants apply the inquiry in a manner that illustrates an understanding and 'care for the tools and instruments of inquiry as well as respect for the ideas (e.g. truth) that serve both to motivate the process and regulate it' (p. 148). This application process is what is sought after when doing both philosophy and history.

But the success of the CoI is not dependent on the notion of progress and is not limited to the discovery of deeper truths towards which the inquiry points (Gardner 1996). It is often the case, as Peter Worley (2018) has explained, that a philosophical inquiry can result in a general inconclusiveness and ambiguity amongst its participants regarding what was the focus of discussion. This *aporetic* result can also be considered a successful outcome if it is capitalised upon to help students evaluate how they communed with one another and the facilitator or teacher during the inquiry, and consider '*what we think, how we think and why we think what we do*' (emphasis theirs, p. 84). This metacognitive reflection can serve to establish a clearer understanding of the epistemological conditions of the subject and the learner, both of which are significant for a student's encounter with, and development of, their historical consciousness as an independent and autonomous learner beyond the history classroom.<sup>3</sup> This metacognitive knowledge is essential for students if they are to work beyond the

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<sup>3</sup> Seixas (2013) has previously called this 'Historical Agency' and discussed this at length in *Historical Agency as a Problem for Researchers in History Education*. This work was instrumental in conceptualising this term and what I am inferring here, however few solutions as to how to foster this agency were and have since then been offered.

historical thinking and reasoning skills and are to do history like this paper has suggested.

Furthermore, the CoI's use in school history classrooms may also result in nuanced applications of historical thinking skills and concepts, such as that concerning the ethical dimensions of history. This concept draws upon questions that are framed by contemporary ethical standards which can be difficult to explore because of the varying moral perspectives that students and teachers possess (CSHC 2018b; Körber 2017). But as Michael Hand (2014, 2018b) has explained, lines of moral inquiry that may use the CoI framework can serve in deconstructing these explorations by differentiating what is and is not morally contestable. Whilst a CoI that focusses on an ethical dimension of history can provide students with the opportunity to reason with their own ethical standards and judgements without a teacher's direction, it can also provide opportunities for teachers to provide direction when basic moral standards are in fact justified. This is a difference between 'directive' and 'nondirective' (Hand 2014, p. 526) moral inquiry and is one that is necessary in doing history. If a reason for using CoI in the history classroom is to provide students with a greater awareness of their historical consciousness, this particular use can lend itself to an opportunity wherein a historical consciousness does need to be addressed directly by the teacher, such as if the inquiry was concerning the topic of 'historic crimes against humanity' (which, as its name suggests, contain a set of justified moral standards).

Finally, in addition to the CoI providing a structured opportunity for a student's historical consciousness to engage with concepts of truth, metacognition and moral reasoning, it fundamentally requires students to participate in the democracy of historical thinking and reasoning. If citizens of the future are to agree or disagree with historians such as McKenna appropriately, then they must be exposed to the collective consciousnesses of the community that are involved, in this case the historical consciousness of either the colonial or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (depending on which collective the individual claims a belonging to). This is a task that requires a student to empathise with the other historical consciousnesses that exist and is thus in need of a disciplined form of inquiry (ACARA 2019) if students are to be curious and imaginative, not judgmental and biased.

In conclusion, a CoI provides a forum for a history student to acquire philosophical skills within this disciplined form of inquiry as they commune alongside others and are asked to provide reasons for their thinking, build on the ideas presented and ask questions when appropriate. This provides opportunities for students to be able to

think, reason and understand history from different perspectives, which subsequently differentiates a historical consciousness from that of a historical perspective or an interpretation. Though these are closely interlinked, the former is ultimately what dictates how someone will proceed into the future with the knowledge of the past that they possess whereas the latter are responsible for establishing this knowledge. If a historical interpretation such as McKenna's was used as a stimulus for a CoI session, then the students engaging with McKenna would express their primary perspective of McKenna's interpretation by using their skills of historical thinking and reasoning, but would go further by applying the inquiry – not McKenna's interpretation – for the purposes of engaging with their own historical consciousness. It is with the use of a philosophically-inspired historical consciousness that students can inquire into conceptions of truth that are offered throughout history and can then evaluate (in a metacognitive manner) their encounter with the perspectives and interpretations that exist, such as the moral reasoning of McKenna's argument. This can be done within the history classroom, but not without the aid of a philosophical framework such as a CoI.

## Conclusion

Accordingly, the futures of both school history and philosophy are closely linked. Though questions of how and why will continue to be asked of these subjects respectively, this paper has offered some answers in respect to these but has also engaged with the fundamental question of 'what is the future of philosophy in schools'? It is evident that this should now become a question for those invested in school history too as students become more historically conscious of the world with their thinking, reasoning and understanding.

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