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Historical Interpretation: Deconstructing Represented Pasts

Abstract: 150 words maximum.

This chapter explores ‘historical interpretation’, a curriculum concept at the centre of historical reasoning and history education, although one that is often neglected. The nature of historical interpretation is clarified, and key aspects of the concept are explained and illustrated. The challenges that learning about interpretation can present for students are identified and explored and four activity types, designed to help students of various ages to develop their understanding of the concept are explained.

Key Words: Historical Interpretation  Historical Thinking  History Education

Introduction and theoretical frame

What are historical interpretations

The past is gone and only traces remain – relics (e.g., a ‘special trains’ timetable)¹ and reports (e.g., combat in the air reports filed by pilots after operations).² Histories are attempts to make sense of the vanished past at a later time, once the events, states of affairs, developments, people, contexts and / or institutions that histories try to make sense of have passed. Histories work with traces to generate accounts of these vanished pasts.³ Historical interpretation is the process of constructing such representations of the absent past and these representations, once constructed, become interpretations.⁴

There are numerous contrasting interpretations of the past, varying in anyone or all of a range of ways, including in:

1 See, for example, Claude Lanzmann’s reading of ‘special train’ schedule Fahrplanordnung 587 in, Shoah: The Complete Text of the Acclaimed Holocaust Film (Boston, MA, 1995), 129–31.
2 See, for example, the report filed by James McCudden on the 26th February 1918 reproduced in Nigel Steel and Peter Hart, Tumult in the Clouds: The British Experience of the War in the Air, 1914-1918 (London, 1997), Plate 19.
• the relations to the past they assume and enact;
• the purposes that drive their construction;
• the traditions of history-making they work within;
• the questions that they set out to answer;
• the archives and traces that they identify as relevant;
• the methods that they use to make sense of the past’s traces;
• the medium and the genres in which they are constructed;
• the audiences to whom they are addressed and by whom they are decoded and consumed;
• the compositional decisions that authors make when organising, presenting and articulating their representations of the past;
• the moments in time in which their research and accounts are written; and
• their author’s / authors’ particular contexts and characteristics.

As this – by no means exhaustive – list makes plain, histories emerge from and are shaped by the contexts in which they arise. They must, therefore, be contextualised and historicised to be understood. In an important sense, then, learning about history making is an exercise in temporal layering – in learning, in our present, about how past interpreters have made sense, in their times, of times that came before both their past presents and our present ‘nows.’ The list also shows, however, contextualising history making – noting how it is shaped by its context – can only go so far. It is insufficient, and ultimately misleading, to model history-makers as simply acted upon and shaped: histories have authors (individuals, working alone or cooperatively in communities and traditions of practice) and these authors actively make many decisions as they make histories. Decisions about what to research and write about, about which questions to ask about this ‘what’ and about ‘why’ these questions are worth asking, decisions about how to go about answering their questions, and so on. Learning about history makers and history making, then, means coming to understand something about these decisions.

Because histories are shaped in contexts and traditions and because there are many decisions to be made when making histories, many varieties of history arise. Varieties of history include – for example – the numerous genres of academic historical writing working in the historicist tradition that we can trace back to historians like Leopold von Ranke in the early nineteenth century. Histories also include oral traditions of storytelling about the pasts, forms of public historical representation through enactment, pictorial representations of pasts, the pasts depicted or evoked through public monumental architecture, theme parks, feature films, and so on. Modern academic

historical writing has been dominated by Western historical traditions – a reflection of the hegemony of Europe and American in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, it is not defined entirely by its origin and there are traditions of historical writing that have worked within academic history to challenge Eurocentric understandings, for example, the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective.

Varieties of historical interpretation exist for a more radical reason, however. Histories aim to help orient in time, to make individuals and communities make sense of finitude, time and change. Academic historical enquiry is simply one of a wide variety of past-referencing social practices and traditions developed to serve these fundamental human needs in contemporary societies, and academic historical representations typically foreground one of a number of possible relations to the past that histories can express – what Paul, following Day, has called the ‘epistemic’ relation to the past, in contrast to ‘material,’ ‘aesthetic,’ ‘political,’ and moral relations, and what Barton and Levstik have called the ‘analytic stance’ to the past, in contrast to others such as the ‘identification stance.’

Why does learning about historical interpretations matter in history education?

How and whether school history should relate to varieties of history is an open question in many contexts and this is so in two senses. First, in some contexts, such as the US, there is, Seixas has argued, a tendency for school history to be much more concerned, when it focuses on historical thinking, with questions of ‘evidence’ than with questions of ‘interpretation’ or ‘accounts.’ In other contexts, such, arguably, as England in the last few years, we have seen an increasing focus on interpretation and accounts. This has been driven, in part, by the development of a set of six historical thinking concepts, which have been argued to be important for understanding historical reasoning.


8 Jörn Rüsen, ed., Western Historical Thinking: An Intercultural Debate (New York and Oxford, 2000);
11 Herman Paul, Key Issues in Historical Theory (Abingdon, 2015); Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, Teaching History for the Common Good (Mahwah NJ, 2004).
decade, it has become common to focus more on academic historical representation than on other modes of representing and constructing the past.\textsuperscript{14}

The curriculum construct ‘interpretations’ – developed in England from the early 1990s – and related concepts developed in German-speaking, Nordic and Dutch traditions of history education, such as historical ‘deconstruction,’\textsuperscript{15} ‘uses of history’\textsuperscript{16} and ‘historical culture’\textsuperscript{17} – open up the possibility of exploring multiple genres of representing and constructing the past in history lessons. Whereas conventional school history has tended to focus either on the transmission of narrative about the past, or, where a focus on historical thinking is adopted, on the construction of historical narratives, a focus on interpretations turns the focus to the de-construction of historical narratives and representations. Where construction focuses on helping children create historical narratives and representations – for example, by working with sources of historical evidence to construct claims about the past – deconstruction focuses on asking children to explore historical narratives and representations that already exist, and on asking them to consider how and why these narratives and representations have been made and what they have been used for.

Given that narrative consumption or narrative construction have typically had more emphasis, in school history education, than the deconstruction of historical representations, it is worth asking why a focus on deconstruction has value and on what is likely to be missed in children’s history education if we do not focus on this. At least two powerful arguments can be advanced, the first is a disciplinary and the second is a wider educational argument.

Understanding historical interpretations is fundamental to understanding all other historical thinking concepts and hence of the discipline of history. Arguments about causation, about significance, about change, and so on, sustain themselves by advancing evidence in support of the claims that they make; however, they share a prior and more


\textsuperscript{15}I borrow the de/construction formulation from German history didactics traditions explored, for example, in Arthur Chapman and Christoph Küblerger, “‘De-Construction of Histories’ or “Understanding Historical Interpretations” – A Comparison of German-Speaking and English Approaches to Learning about Historical Representations” (presented at the Historical Consciousness, Historical Thinking, Historical Culture: Core concepts of history didactics and historical education in intercultural perspectives, Online, the University of Graz, 2020); and in Andreas Körber, ‘Historical Consciousness, Historical Competencies – and beyond? Some Conceptual Development within German History Didactics’, 2015 <https://www.pedocs.de/volltexte/2015/10811/pdf/Koerber_2015_Development_German_History_Didactics.pdf>.

\textsuperscript{16}Kenneth Nordgren, ‘How to Do Things With History: Use of History as a Link Between Historical Consciousness and Historical Culture’, Theory & Research in Social Education, 44/4 (2016), 479–504.

\textsuperscript{17}Maria Grever and Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, ‘Historical Culture: A Concept Revisited’, in Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education, ed. by Mario Carretero, Stefan Berger, and Maria Grever (London, 2017), 73–90.
important common feature – they are all attempts to say something about an absent past by modelling and representing it in the present in which they are composed. Furthermore – and as the word ‘composed’ implies – such interpretations of the past have authors who, like all authors of all texts anywhere – actively make decisions as they craft the texts they compose, and these decisions are both epistemic (the choice of question/s to ask, of archives to interrogate, of methods to adopt, and so on)\(^{18}\) and compositional (choices of central narrative pro- and antagonist/s, choices about focalization, choices of themes to foreground, and so on).\(^{19}\) Deconstructive thinking about interpretation, then, is foundational for good progress to be made in understanding core aspects of more conventional historical teaching and learning – students can only truly come to understand why, for example, accounts of the causes of past events differ, when they come to understand that they are accounts, and, as such, are inherently plural, being relative to the contexts of their production, the methodological decisions made by their authors, and so on.

A broader argument for taking a deconstructive approach when designing historical learning might focus on the importance of children coming to understanding how history is used and abused in the world around them. Representations of the past are ubiquitous in our students’ presents – in school history textbooks, in public monumental architecture, in film and television, in computer games, and so on. Many of these representations involve scholarship – Ubisoft, for example, draw extensively on the work of historians when constructing virtual representations of past worlds\(^{20}\) – and, thus share some formal features with academic historical practice. Many do not, however, and express and help constitute relations to the past other than the analytical relations prized in the discipline of history.\(^{21}\) Public representations of the past are consequential – they foreground and highlight and they can also background and obscure – as recent debates about statues and other forms of public monumental architecture and their role in silencing difficult pasts have shown.\(^{22}\) They are also potentially influential in impacting children’s understandings of past and present, as has been argued, theoretically, in relation to children’s historical consciousness,\(^{23}\) and, empirically, in relation to children’s sense of


connectedness with past actors and awareness of differences in perspective. The fact that historical interpretations and representations can play significant roles in shaping young peoples’ perceptions of the world, and the fact that histories are often deliberately constructed to shape and reshape perceptions, are, perhaps, among the most compelling arguments for focusing on historical interpretation in history classes. If past-referencing narratives are ubiquitous and potentially contentious, then narrative competence - or the ability to perceive and to deconstruct these representations - is, arguably, be central part of general democratic education.

Research on Students’ Understandings of Historical Interpretations

Relatively little is known about children’s thinking about historical interpretation, compared to what is known about other aspects of their thinking in history. There has been extensive work for many decades on how children think about historical evidence – for example, Shemilt’s 1980 Evaluation Study of the Schools History Project in England, or more recently, work in the US on using historical sources to read and think like an historian. There has been very little equivalent work on how children understand what histories are, and how children understand (or fail to understand) how historical accounts differ in kind from the traces of the past from which they are constructed. Ground-breaking work on these issues was conducted as part the research project Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches (CHATA) in the University of London in the 1990s and in linked doctoral studies in the decades that followed. My own doctoral and

26 A recent groundbreaking study of narrative competence in history is Stéphane Lévesque and Jean-Philippe Croteau, Beyond History for Historical Consciousness: Students, Narrative, and Memory (Toronto, 2020).
subsequent research has focused on interpretations, largely in the context of academic history.  

A key finding supported in much of the research on accounts can be summarised in the idea that many students, who are able to articulate reasonably coherent understandings, treat knowledge construction in history (a discipline with an absent object – the past) as if it were knowledge construction in everyday life (where claims can be verified by observation), and that these students often understand historical knowledge in naïve realist terms. Historical accounts, on this account, should operate like mirrors of a fixed past, reflecting back essentially the same picture. On this understanding of how history works, divergence in accounts becomes problematic, and reflects either gaps in transmission of information from the past (an incomplete record), errors on the part of historians in retrieving information from traces of the past, or distortions introduced, either deliberately or unwittingly, by those who construct accounts. There are exceptions to this understanding, some students seeing, for example, that accounts cannot be mirrors and are more like theories constructed in response to questions, and that historians are active in constructing their narratives and descriptions of the past which reflect their choices. However, for many students, ideal history makers are passive and understood as reflecting the past rather than constructing histories in an active manner.  

Activities to help students learn to deconstruct historical interpretations

The preceding discussion has outlined: first, the central role of decision-making and the range of types of decision that are involved in history-making (epistemic decision-making, narrative decision-making, and so on); and second, the finding that children’s default assumptions about what histories are and about how they are made can limit their ability to make sense of variation in historical interpretation. It seems both reasonable and prudent, therefore, to suggest that curriculum planning and instructional design in school history should focus, first, on conveying understandings about the kinds of activity that needs must arise when making history, and, second, on the ways in which these decisions might vary in different types of history making.


Chapman, ‘“They Have Come to Differing Opinions Because of Their Differing Interpretations”: Developing 16-19 Year-Old English Students’ Understandings of Historical Interpretation through on-Line Inter-Institutional Discussion’, 188–214; Chapman, ‘Historical Interpretations’, 100–112; Chapman and Goldsmith, ‘“Dialogue between the Source and the Historian’s View Occurs”: Mapping Change in Student Thinking about Historical Accounts in Expert and Peer Online Discussion’, 183–2010.

The remainder of this chapter will focus, therefore, on suggestions for types of activity that might contribute to developing these understandings. The presentation is by no means exhaustive – four aspects of historical interpretation are discussed. The examples given draw on existing literature and are widely adaptable to different types of curriculum content.

**Activitiy 1: Questioning and Types of History**

Histories are shaped profoundly by the kinds of enquiry that they arise from, and this is true in at least two senses:

1. Historical interpretations are shaped by the questions that they ask – an historical investigation that asks why and something happened in the past (e.g., ‘Why did an industrial revolution begin in Britain in the 18th century?’) will proceed very differently from an investigation that asks why an historical event or process had the character that it had (e.g., ‘Why was the industrial revolution so socially disruptive?’);

2. Historical interpretations are shaped by the types of representation they express – an analytical exploration of questions in political history (e.g., ‘When did Gorbachev’s position as General Secretary of the Communist Party become untenable?’) differs profoundly from an exploration of the public historical and political question ‘How should a public figure be commemorated?’.

How can the roles of questions and of types of historical representation be made accessible to children? One approach with upper secondary (16-18-year-old) students might be to focus on easily accessible aspects of history books – such as their titles and front covers, their tables of contents and the summaries of their contents that publishers provide on the backs of books. Students could be asked to compare these features of books and to comment on how they appear to differ. They could also be asked to speculate about the contents – about what they would expect a book with one title to contain. Their suggestions could then be tested against the books’ tables of contents or publishers’ summaries. They might also be asked to consider what different historians might have to do differently, in their research, to answer questions of different types. Students might also be asked to match titles or images of front covers to different publishers’ summaries.

To exemplify, with books about the French Revolution. The following are the titles of a selection of books on the revolution:

- *Citizens: A chronicle of the French Revolution*;
- *The Women of the French Revolution*;
- *The Crowd in the French Revolution*;
- *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution*;
- *The Coming of the French Revolution*.32

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As these titles suggest – and as students might be helped to come to see, with a mixture of questioning and instruction, these titles present distinct enquiries into the past and would require different kinds of research and, perhaps, different kinds of writing. The titles also open-up different types of history. Schama’s title, for example, implies a narrative history of the events of the revolution from the perspective of those who lived through it – something that one would not expect from Lefebvre’s title which implies, perhaps, a long-term account of the origins of the revolution. The titles of Rudé’s and Linton’s titles point to different types of history – ‘history from below’ and ‘history from above’ respectively – and both differ from Kelly’s book, a work of women’s history.

The following book publicity summary, for example – from Linton’s book - could be used as suggested above, to help verify or test students’ hypotheses about the book, based on its title, and to open-up discussion of the kinds of research you would need to do and the kinds of sources you would need to seek out, and the ways in which you might have to analyze your sources if you were undertaking the research implied by the title summarized here.

Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution examines the leaders of the French Revolution - Robespierre and his fellow Jacobins - and particularly the gradual process whereby many of them came to 'choose terror'. These men led the Jacobin Club between 1789 and 1794, and were attempting to establish new democratic politics in France. Exploring revolutionary politics through the eyes of these leaders, and against a political backdrop of a series of traumatic events, wars, and betrayals, Marisa Linton portrays the Jacobins as complex human beings who were influenced by emotions and personal loyalties, as well as by their revolutionary ideology.33

A scheme of learning exploring the question of types of history and types of historical representation, in a way that makes these issues accessible or upper primary (10-11-year-olds) is reported by Brown and Wrenn.34 The scheme of learning explores differences between how academic historians and Hollywood film-makers might approach and represent the past by comparing two representations – Oliver Stone’s feature film Alexander and text written in the style of academic history but presented in a form accessible for the age group. The comparison is framed around the following enquiry question that is used to structure a sequence of lessons:

- Why do filmmakers and historians say different things about Alexander the Great?

Several strategies are developed through the sequence to help make relevant concepts - for example, purpose – accessible to students, including teacher role-play of both the film director and the historian, and analysis of texts and artefacts to bring out differences in


34 Geraint Brown and Andrew Wrenn, ‘“It’s like They’ve Gone up a Year!” Gauging the Impact of a History Transition Unit on Teachers of Primary and Secondary History’, Teaching History, 121 (2005), 5–13.
genre and composition, for example, an analysis of the film’s trailer in terms of sound, images and narration. The sequence also encouraged students actively to explore text creation themselves, for example, by designing a DVD cover and by composing a newspaper article reporting a press conference that teachers had role-played to dramatize disagreements between the filmmaker and the historian.

**Activity 2: Methodologies of investigation**

Research methodology is a vital area of all historical representation – even for those genres that might not seem, prima facie, to require research. Whether you see yourself as a ‘researcher’ or not, you still need a strategy to gather knowledge about the past if you are going to represent it in the present – be that through a monument, a design for a commemorative stamp, the mise-en-scène for a film, or a monograph.

Hammond’s report of a strategy that she developed to help lower secondary (13-14-year-old) students engage with sophisticated questions of theory and method that can serve, perhaps, as a model. 35 Hammond’s topic is the living conditions and experiences of enslaved people in the North American plantation system in the nineteenth century. Hammond explored contrasting methodologies for constructing knowledge of this challenging topic with students – cliometric quantitative history and microhistory. 36

The key to the success of the strategy seems likely to have been the dramatic contrasts in the two modes of analysis – one working by counting, and at scale, and resulting in graphical representations showing variations in life expectancy, diet, housing, and so on, and the other working narrowly, but in depth, allowing the experience of enslavement, exploitation and resistance to be foregrounded. With skilful teaching, such contrasts can be used to open-up comparative questions about representation. What do we see, and what do we miss, one can ask students, if we focus on this topic using this approach to research? One can imagine sequencing learning about methodology so that a range of contrasting approaches are examined over time to explore different issues, and so that students are asked constantly to consider advantages and opportunity-costs. These issues can be linked back to questioning also – there are questions that one can simply not answer by looking at one case study, for example, and there are questions that only quantitative analysis can answer.

**Activity 3: Conceptualisation and theoretical frameworks**

Methodology seems quite abstract, but, as we have seen, clear contrasts of approach in the context of a particular problem can help make these issues concrete and accessible. The following is an approach that I developed, when teaching upper secondary students (16-18-year-olds), drawing on an example from epistemology. 37 The task is a simple one and one that rapidly raises questions of conceptualisation, with careful teacher

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37 Chapman, ‘Twist and Shout? Developing Sixth Form Students’ Thinking about Historical Interpretation’, 24–32. I drew on the work of Kevin Harris to develop this exercise, as I explained in footnote 19 on page 32 of that article.
questioning. It raises issues that can be rapidly transferred to history, but it starts in an everyday context for students. It also raises questions of definition that arise in any context of representation and it makes explicit what might otherwise remain implicit.

The activity begins by presenting students with a problem, in the context of a local public space familiar the students (at the time I was teaching in Truro, hence the example):

Two research teams have been instructed to count the exact number of people in Lemon Quay, Truro at precisely 11:57 am on Tuesday 15 February 2011. One team reports the number as 267.5 people and the other as 1,756. How on earth do we explain this dramatic discrepancy?38

In my experience, students first move, in response, is to posit errors, incompetence or dishonesty in the researchers to explain the discrepancy. These are all possible, of course, but these suggestions miss a fundamental point – in all research, one cannot apply concepts in data collection without first clearly articulating a definition. In the case, the question ‘Where does the square begin and end?’ arises. Does it, for example, include the shops that surround it and the people in them? You cannot, of course count people without defining them - is a pregnant person one or two? Again, in my experience, students can usually be brought to articulate these insights through questioning.

The problems that arise in this case arise in many historical cases – for example, one of the earliest political photographs in British history is of a political demonstration in London in 1848 and the picture is often interpreted to explore why the movement depicted failed – competing assessments of numbers attending and of their apparent radicalism have been advanced. Such claims all depend on clarifying definitions and indicators for the concepts concerned.39

**Activity 4: Modes of narration**

Historical narration is a complex matter and there are many ways in which it could be explored – for example, in terms of narrative templates and narrative structure.40 The potential that the issue opens up can be demonstrated at a micro and relative simple level – the level of the paragraph and in relation to the sequencing and interconnection of singular factual propositions, in the first example, and in terms of inclusion and exclusion and phrasing, in the other.

Bertolt Brecht’s 1948 poem ‘Alles Wandelt Sich’ (translated as ‘Everything Changes,’ for example, by Cicely Herbert for Poems on The Underground 41) presents a series of propositions in two contrasting orders – the first stanza conveying a sense of irrevocable

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40 Lévesque and Croteau, Beyond History for Historical Consciousness: Students, Narrative, and Memory.
defeat and the second stanza conveying a sense of optimism. The only differences between the two stanzas are the sequence in which statements are presented and the use of connectives (such as ‘but’) to link the statements. It has the effect, then, of dramatizing the effect of narration alone on meaning, since it is only the narration and not the content that changes. A teaching exercise that might bring this home to students could involve presenting them with the individual statements and with connectives on separate cards, prior to showing them the poem, and asking them to find as many possible sequences as they can of the statements and to consider their effects on meaning. Students could be asked to consider what these effects reveal about the impact of narrative decision-making on meaning.

An interesting and more conventionally historical example is a short narrative about Hitler created by Lee to demonstrate the ways in which the validity of historical accounts involves more than simply the truth of their component statements. The narrative is made up of true statements, but the overall narrative is highly partial and misleading – because of statements that are left out and / or because of tendentious phrasing in some statements that renders them only partial truths. Presented with a narrative like this, students could, again, be asked to consider the effects of the narrator’s decisions in making meaning, in this case including decisions about inclusion and exclusion and phrasing, as well as the decisions about sequencing and connection raised by the Brecht example.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to indicate fruitful ways in which existing research and practice literature can perhaps help us in moving students’ thinking forward through instructional design. More research is needed on students’ assumptions about historical interpretations and accounts and on the effects of particular interventions and instructional designs in moving students’ thinking forward. It would be particularly valuable, no doubt, for studies to track these issues longitudinally, over the course of students’ careers in school, to note if and how systematic planning to address misconceptions and develop understanding could positively impact knowledge and understanding of the active decision making and the genres of representation that are at the heart of historical interpretation.

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