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Chapter 10. Historical digital literacy – Social media and the multicultural classroom

Abstract: Over the past three years, the Western world has seen many conflicts around history. Statues have been torn down, anniversaries have been debated, historical figures have been re-evaluated, and many have begun to question or defend their own national historical narrative. Social media has heightened the debate, with antagonists engaging in fierce and usually not very nuanced debates on Twitter and Facebook. In this text, we try to build a digital historical didactic framework for how teachers can work with controversial history in the multi-cultural classroom by using social media as a resource. Through an analysis of second order concepts such as significance, historical perspective, and historical empathy based on a historical cultural perspective and with the use of history in focus, we hope that teachers in the classroom will be able to contribute to increased intercultural competence. In a final example, we analyze how people with different backgrounds and different purposes in a thread on Twitter debate the history behind the celebration of Columbus Day in a city in the USA.

Keywords: History culture, use of history, second order concepts, inter-cultural competence, social media, Columbus Day

Introduction

Six men sits outside a coffee shop. One of them is reading a newspaper.

- Bobby:** *It happens. Massachusetts! Listen to this shit. "New Jersey Council of Indian Affairs has announced plans "to disrupt Monday's Columbus Day Parade in Newark. "Council Chairman, Del Redclay, Professor of Cultural Anthropology /.../ says council members and supporters will lie down "in the path of Columbus Day marchers "in protest of Columbus' role in the genocide "of America's native peoples. "To launch their protest, the Native Americans and their sympathizers "plan to begin a deathwatch tomorrow "over the statue of Columbus in Christopher Columbus Park. "*
- Patsy:** *Some f*cking balls, bad-mouthing America, especially now.*
- Furio:** *I thought that Columbus was the hero of America.*
- Ralph:** *See, it's these Indians and the Commie f*cks. They wanna paint Columbus as a slave trader instead of an explorer.*
- Cristopher:** *You gotta admit, they did get massacred, the Indians.*
- Silvio:** *We gave them a bunch of shit to make up for that. Land, reservations. And now they got the casinos.*

- Vito:** *What the f*ck we ever get we didn't have to work for?*
- Bobby:** *I wouldn't mind sitting all day smoking mushrooms and collecting government checks.*
- Silvio:** *You know what it is? I'll tell you what it is. It's anti-Italian discrimination. Columbus Day is a day of Italian pride. It's our holiday, and they wanna take it away.*
- Furio:** *F*ck them. But I never liked Columbus. In Napoli, a lot of people are not so happy for Columbus – 'cause he was from Genova.*
- Ralph:** *What's the problem with Genova?*
- Furio:** *The North of Italy always have the money and the power. They punish the South since hundreds of years. Even today, they put up their nose at us, like we're peasants. I hate the North.*
- Vito:** *Jesus, take it easy.*
- Silvio:** *I'm gonna take action, here.*

(Sopranos, Columbus Day, 2002)

The above passage is from an episode in the famous television series *The Sopranos*. It centres on Tony Soprano, the head of an Italian American crime family where Italian roots are tenderly cared for. Tony and his associate are reading a newspaper article reporting a planned action on Columbus Day with a lie-in strike and speeches to be held at the Columbus Statue. The Sopranos perceive this as pure provocation. For them, Columbus is a historical person of great positive significance.

The above scene in the series depicts a clash between cultural identities. Historical cultural identities are created and recreated via narratives constructed from a perceived group's common past. The two narratives that clash above are completely different even though they deal with the same past and same historical person. One narrative concerns Columbus as an agent whose role is to be the hero. Columbus is credited with good qualities, such as being brave and ambitious, and seems to be a part of a historical narrative that tells the story of who Italian Americans are and how they came to America. Of course, none of the Soprano members around the table have any connections to Columbus. Nevertheless, that Columbus was Italian makes him the perfect beginning of a story that ends with Italian Americans' rights to be part of the United States. Historical facts such as Columbus never actually having landed in what was to become the United States and that he sailed under the Spanish flag are of little importance as the Sopranos use history to construct a collective memory and context-creating relationships that build their identity around a common origin.

Against this narrative stands another: in the scene from *Sopranos* is the narrative of the oppression of the indigenous people. This narrative, as we shall see, describes a lost golden age. Here, Columbus' landing represents the beginning of an ongoing decline of an ancient culture; and based on this

narrative, the celebration of Columbus is perceived as offensive. It is a structural narrative about the negative consequences of European migration to America. This connects to Rousseau's statement about a collective memory based in tragedy: "Catastrophic experiences, often connected to what has been described as the original and founding tragedy of the identity of certain peoples" (Rousseau, 2016, p. 39).

In the scene we also encounter a third story. Furio is not Italian American but an Italian from the southern part of Italy. For Furio, Columbus represents the northern rich parts of Italy that oppressed the people from the poorer southern parts. This third narrative will, however, not be part of the analysis in this chapter. Nevertheless, the comments of this southern Italian remind us of the complexity of the issue.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the history didactic possibilities of analysing the use of controversial history in social media in a classroom setting that aims to increase the students' awareness of the importance of history in the construction of different collective identities. Such teaching is essential if one wants to promote the development of the students' digital intercultural competence. We will show how history teaching can become an important subject in helping the students to understand controversial issues in their own contemporary society. Perceived and invented historical wrongdoings are dangerous weapons when different groups meet and negotiate spatial and temporal rights. A teaching that can make these historical-cultural processes visible and help students analyse statements about history can increase tolerance and lead to more rewarding intercultural encounters. Intercultural is a normative concept that assumes mutual respect and interactions between members from different cultural communities in a society. Intercultural communication can thereby lead to a dialogue that has the potential to ease conflicts and cultural divisions (Nordgren & Johansson, 2015).

Teaching history to develop intercultural skills

Understanding teaching of history as a way to develop these needed skills and attitudes among the students implies two starting points of how to understand history and the art of history teaching. First, the focus for history teaching must be that of the contemporary and the future. History teaching is not, in this case, first and foremost to teach students more about the past. Rather, the mission turns to teach the students in what ways they and others are history today, namely, understanding history from the inside of a certain historical culture. This makes history urgent in the contemporary and for future acts. Through this kind of

teaching, the individual student should have the opportunity to get an image of both who she and others are and where she and others are situated in time. Historical orientation in the contemporary is not only a matter of knowing but also that of being and wanting. Seixas maintains that history education should “promote students’ understanding of their own historicity, their embeddedness in historical processes” (Seixas, 2007, p. 446), and thereby the focus on the contemporary. In addition, Wertsch asserts that history becomes most powerful to the students when it can be used to answer important current questions about “relationships, identity, mortality, and agency” (Wertsch, 2004, p. 280). Moving the purpose of history teaching from the past to the contemporary and the future can make it more valuable to the students, not least in the multi-cultural classroom where different historical cultures need to co-exist.

The second starting point for history teaching in this context entails that teaching history to develop intercultural competencies must acknowledge history and the perception of history as a cultural phenomenon, where historical culture and the use of history become carrying concepts to understand how people from different cultures use history to orient, communicate, build identities and act (Nordgren & Johansson, 2015). For Nordgren and Johansson (2015) using history to orient in the contemporary society, history education should focus on three knowledges. Firstly, different cultural groups’ use of history should be represented in the history teaching. Secondly, students should understand how this knowledge makes it easier to interpret others’ use of history. Thirdly, history should be presented as a means to understand the students’ own multicultural contemporary.

To understand how this can be done, we will start from the concept of historical culture to create an overall theory of how history supports and creates different collective identities. We will argue that this is not about more or less legitimate interpretations of history, although this is also true, but that historical culture creates narratives that appeal to the deeper needs of humans’ existential being. The narratives appeal not only to the need to be part of a historical process that extends beyond one’s own life and to be part of a group, but also sometimes to the need to be able to point out threats from a perceived Other. The narratives used in a historical culture thereby shape collective identities.

Further, we contend that certain historical thinking concepts can be useful in the history classroom. To realise this, we analyse how historical thinking concepts can help us understand the contemporary use of history. The concepts are thereby also understood as a part of and as used in a certain historical culture. The current concepts are that of *historical significance*, *historical perspective* and *historical empathy*. As every discipline has its own vocabulary, concepts, text

structure and grammar, how one negotiates this in a certain subject is what is referred to as disciplinary literacy (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). However, this is a relative term and a work in progress. This chapter is a way to understand important historical concepts in a new context: that of analysing use of history in the contemporary. Thus, we suggest a widening of the understanding of what historical literacy is, that is, a conceptual learning and thinking grounded in the concepts of use of history and historical culture.

Based on this line of reasoning, we use the three concepts – historical significance, historical perspective and historical empathy – to understand and to analyse a historical debate about Columbus Day in a Twitter thread. The main reasons for our study are, on one hand, the wave of conflicts about history that has swept the Western world in recent years, often in the form of attacks on historical statues erected by previous generations whose intentions the younger generations no longer share and even perceive as offensive. On the other hand, social media is used by adolescents a great deal, and thereby a place where they meet history and are confronted by use of history. This empirical part should be understood as an example of how the historical thinking concepts can be used in the classroom to develop intercultural competencies when different narratives from different historical cultures clash.

Historical culture

Analytically, historical culture can firstly be said to be a “pantry” filled with historically attributed significant events. These events are the content of a historical culture. Secondly, the content is transformed into meaningful narratives that weave together the actualized past, the present and the future. Historical culture becomes a network of narratives, symbols and concepts that creates meaning of the flow of time in a society. Thirdly, it consists of members of the community who are in dialogue with the historical culture and who, by participating in this culture, create collective memories, and what Paul Ricoeur calls a narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1985). Identity, narrative and actualized pasts are therefore interconnected in an ongoing dialog in and between historical cultures.

The form of the narratives means they can be analysed structurally as different narrative patterns. One example is that of Hayden White’s concept of tropes. The function of the tropes – such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony – is that they indirectly characterize an object by activating collective notions (White, 2014). The construction of narratives in a historical culture can also be understood from what Wertsch (2004) calls narrative templates, that is,

certain ways of structural understanding and ways of constructing narratives in a culture. Wertsch has analysed Russian narratives about the Great Patriotic War and found that generations of Russians tell the same story. Another example of form is Jörn Rüsen's anthropological typology of how the flow of time is shaped and given meaning. Through the patterns of stories, the past is assigned meaning via various cultural symbols and concepts. Rüsen expounds, "Here time is manifested as culture: it has the features of symbols and languages, of images and concepts" (Rüsen, 2016, p. 11). For instance, time becomes a mythical past by being traced to an origin. The use of Columbus is, as we shall see, a good example of how myths of origins are constructed. By being shaped into a series of events, it becomes historic. History books in school often follow this pattern of explanation via cause and consequences. Narrative patterns can also be about salvation or the forthcoming apocalypse. The present narrative about the climate crisis is a good example of a story about an apocalypse and functions as a strong call for immediate action. Another type of pattern is the compressing of time where the past becomes mysterious. For instance, a long time is shaped into a specific moment (Rüsen, 2016). The French Revolution is an example of such a moment that is given extra importance in the flow of time. In this chapter, we understand Columbus' landing in America as such a compression of time, and therefore given extra importance in different historical cultures and their narratives about this historical event. These different forms of narratives are equally important for both the sender and the receiver of historical narratives. History is perceived as meaningful only if it is inserted into the patterns given in a certain culture and if those who interpret it are familiar with the same cultural patterns. The explanation is that history is not only around us "but in us as thought patterns and future dispositions of action" [authors' translation from Swedish] (Karlsson, 2010, p. 19 f.). Narrative patterns are tools with the potential to create meaning. Cultural patterns infuse meaning into the historical content and help us from a very young age to orient in the temporal dimension of the past, the present and the future (Rudnert, 2019).

Ricoeur goes one step further. For Ricoeur, narrative ultimately becomes a way of understanding identity as a narrative identity. We tell the story of ourselves in narratives. In these historical narratives, through the practices of orientation, the historical past is woven together with fictional qualities in certain patterns. These fictional qualities can be understood as White's tropes or as Rüsen's typology of patterns. In dialogue with historical narratives, collective identity is created. People become participants in a historical culture by growing up in a context of certain narratives shaping their identity. Within this historical culture, common

collective memories and what Ricoeur calls narrative identity are created and recreated inside the community.

Lev Vygotsky claimed that we remember by tying a knot around the finger (Vygotsky, 1978). Days of remembrance, such as Columbus Day, become the knots that build up the historical culture; and with the double existence of a statue in the room, a place and a day in the calendar, we create a gathering point where collective memories can be actualized, strengthened and passed on to the next generation. Ricoeur maintains that we create archives, like museums, not only to remember the past but also to influence the next generation with what we want them to remember in the future (Ricoeur, 1985).

If we understand historical culture in these ways, we must understand that we approach history with different identities. And this, of course, affects how we understand and use historical thinking concepts in certain contexts.

How to understand historical thinking concepts in historical cultures

Migration, multiculturalism and globalization have for some decades challenged the national history teaching and questioned what the task of history in the schools should consider as urgent (Banks, 2009; Carretero et al., 2012; Nash et al., 2000). At the same time, research has shown that many students today do not see the value of school history and how it relates to their own lives and identities. In other words, history as a school subject does not seem important to students in their own contemporary lives (Haydn & Harris, 2010; Lee & Howson, 2009; Van Straaten et al., 2018).

According to VanSledright (2008), students bring a wide variety of images, ideas and conceptions about the past to the history classroom. This condition reflects sociocultural assumptions about the world but can also reveal a sense of the self. The internalized memories, cultural codes and norms constitute the students' being in time. VanSledright argues that such temporal beings constitute prior knowledge to the student when she is learning historical thinking and understanding. Thereby, the researcher's argumentation looks a lot like the consequences of living within a certain historical culture, and he describes how students already have formed conceptualizations and culturally memories of the past as they learn history in school.

In addition, Peck (2018) has showed how the students' identities shape their understanding of history. She describes five ways in which students' national, ethnic and indigenous identities can influence their understanding of history: the construction of historical narratives, the evaluation of historical evidence, the