



The Custodians of the Past: Teacher Bias, Cognitive Impressions, and the Sanctity of Historical Narration

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Abstract

Teaching history requires not only a meticulous understanding of specific subject matter but also a broader comprehension of the discipline as a whole. The role of the facilitator or lecturer is pivotal in shaping students' historical consciousness, as the manner in which historical concepts and phenomena are conveyed can significantly influence their understanding. The interpretation of historical events is often subject to variation, depending on the educator's approach—whether intentional or unintentional. Effective teaching of history demands a comprehensive and nuanced engagement with the material, ensuring clarity and depth in explanation.

This paper critically examines the role of educators in shaping students' perceptions of history, with a particular focus on the impact of instructional methods on cognitive engagement and learning outcomes. Drawing upon principles of educational psychology, it explores how different pedagogical approaches influence students' comprehension, critical thinking, and historical reasoning. The study underscores the necessity of deliberate and reflective teaching strategies to foster an informed and analytical understanding of history among learners.

Introduction

History education shapes how students engage with the past, influencing their analytical skills and historical reasoning. Educators play a crucial role, not just in delivering facts but in fostering critical thinking through diverse teaching strategies. The effectiveness of history instruction is closely linked to educational psychology, as cognitive engagement depends on interactive and inquiry-based learning rather than rote memorization. Given history's inherent subjectivity, teachers must balance factual accuracy with analytical depth, encouraging students to question and interpret historical narratives. In this context, the role of the educator extends beyond knowledge transmission to the cultivation of historical reasoning skills, encouraging students to question, analyze, and synthesize historical information.

The Weight of Words : The Psychology of Historical Narration

For centuries, traditional intellectuals preserved and transmitted history before modern historiography emerged. Depending on the writer, history became a tool of hegemony or counter hegemony. Given this situation, it is crucial to assess how Indian professional historians have, to some extent, contributed to the decline of their discipline.¹

While historians influence how history is written and interpreted, teachers play a crucial role in enriching its transmission. By making history engaging and exciting, they can inspire critical thinking and a deeper appreciation of the past, countering the decline of the subject.

Research on the classroom construction of discourse has explored ways in which knowledge is situationally constituted.² Studies on the construction of classroom discourse have explored how knowledge is shaped by the specific context in which it is taught and learned. Factors such as teachers' presentation of information, the classroom environment, and student-teacher interactions play a crucial role in shaping understanding.

Hallam's study suggests that, on average, students take about four more years to grasp historical concepts at an abstract level compared to subjects like math and science. Some believe that history is best understood in adulthood, as it requires maturity and cultural experience, and that teaching cannot speed up this developmental process.

Elton argues that most students under fifteen are better engaged by real-life stories rather than complex topics like economic or political history. He warns that trying too hard to teach what history truly is at a young age may bore students and discourage them from studying it later.³

There are differing viewpoints on how history should be taught—some believe historical understanding develops naturally with maturity and cultural experience, while others emphasize the role of teaching in shaping perspectives. When students reach the stage of abstract thinking, their understanding should not be confined to how their teacher taught or interpreted history. It is the teacher's responsibility to encourage multiple perspectives, opening avenues for critical thinking. Even those uninterested in history should recognize that they can develop their own interpretations rather than accepting the teacher's explanations as the only correct ones.

Biases in Historical Narration

Teachers' judgments and interactions with students greatly impact their learning, emotions, and access to resources. If educators do not recognize their influence, they may misuse or fail to use it effectively. Bartolome & Trueba (2000) argue that teachers must first understand that their teaching methods are shaped by their own beliefs and ideologies.⁴

Teachers' judgments and interactions with students significantly impact their learning, emotions, and access to resources. Therefore, educators must be mindful of what they include in their explanations, critically analyze their teaching practices, and make a conscious effort to eliminate ideological biases if they inadvertently influence classroom discussions.

Retrieval practice is most commonly seen in the form of low stakes quizzing, and a couple of articles on this practice have been recorded recently in the pages of Teaching History. It should be noted, however, that any activity that asks us to recall something from memory is a form of retrieval practice. If I do not attempt to retrieve those events from memory again, then I am unlikely to be able to remember them six months or a year later. If,

however, I attempt to retrieve those events at spaced-out intervals (a day, a week, a month, a few months, and so on) then there is more chance that those events will become strong storage strength memories, and I am more likely to remember them in the future.⁵

If a student recalls specific details from a history lecture, that knowledge is more likely to stay with them for years. Therefore, teachers must carefully consider their approach, ensuring that history is taught in a way that encourages students to think critically and engage with historical phenomena on their own.

It is this tendency towards selective moral commentary on the past that poses a major danger to the proper teaching of teaching. By ‘proper teaching of history, I mean, amongst other things, helping the child through the presentation of evidence to develop an ability for impartial and objective judgement. (Ihebuzor, 1984)⁶

Perception, and Historical Memory Formation

Genuine relationships, built on respectful interactions, communication, and empathy, help make transitions smoother. When teachers encourage meaningful dialogue—whether individually or in groups—it helps students better understand others and their perspectives. Such conversations promote a shared search for understanding, empathy, and appreciation (Noddings, 2005). This process should be intentionally guided by the teacher’s observations and interactions within these real and meaningful relationships.⁷ Fostering dialogue encourages students to engage with diverse viewpoints, promoting critical thinking and broader understanding. Additionally, if a teacher unintentionally or deliberately incorporates personal biases, open discussions can help mitigate their influence, ensuring a more balanced and objective learning environment.

Critical pedagogy posits that the traditional form of education, which oftentimes reinforces current power principles and maintains social inequality, should be replaced by a more liberatory form that is able to empower students by hearing their voices and promoting social change.⁸ By recognizing students’ perspectives and promoting analytical engagement, this approach equips learners to challenge, evaluate, and actively participate in significant social transformation, making education a more impactful and enriching journey.

Teachers rated high on “Change of Beliefs” did tend to be effective in changing attitudes. Teachers whom students rated as having an impact on beliefs were effective in changing attitudes.⁹

This highlights the significant impact educators have on students’ cognitive and emotional development. When teachers present ideas thoughtfully, encourage critical thinking, and foster open discussions, they can positively shape students’ viewpoints and intellectual growth. However, this influence also underscores the responsibility teachers bear in ensuring their approach is balanced and constructive. If educators unintentionally introduce biases or rigid perspectives, they may limit students’ ability to think independently.

Therefore, it is essential for teachers to be mindful of their teaching methods, promote diverse viewpoints, and create an environment where students can develop their own informed opinions. By doing so, they not only enhance learning but also cultivate critical thinkers capable of engaging with complex ideas beyond the classroom.

Students’ perception of History’s significance directly influences their academic success in the subject. By effectively conveying its value, teachers can inspire curiosity and enthusiasm, uncovering learners who are actively engaged and motivated to excel.¹⁰

Implications for Education: Reforming the Teaching of History

The teaching of history must be reformed to encourage critical thinking, intellectual independence, and meaningful engagement with the past. Research indicates that students take longer to grasp historical concepts at an abstract level compared to subjects like math and science, necessitating pedagogical approaches that facilitate deeper understanding rather than rote memorization. Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping students' beliefs and attitudes, making it imperative for them to be mindful of their instructional methods. Encouraging open dialogue and diverse perspectives not only mitigates the effects of personal biases but also fosters an environment where students can critically analyze historical events.

Furthermore, retrieval practices, such as spaced repetition, should be incorporated to strengthen memory retention and long-term comprehension. By embracing critical pedagogy, educators can move beyond the traditional transmission of historical narratives and instead empower students to engage with history as an evolving and interpretative discipline, ultimately contributing to a more informed and analytical society.

Schools, as academic institutions, must embrace inclusive and balanced learning. Their choice of textbooks reflects both their credibility and the curriculum's integrity. A strong school system upholds democracy, plurality, and a deeper understanding of India's diverse communities.¹¹ Teachers must remain neutral in historical instruction, but the school environment is equally crucial in maintaining objectivity. Schools should not act as promoters of any particular ideology or entity but should foster critical thinking and balanced inquiry. A neutral academic space ensures the integrity of historical narration and encourages a deeper, unbiased understanding of the past.

Conclusion

History education should inspire inquiry, not just recollection. By fostering critical thinking, open dialogue, and diverse perspectives, teachers can transform history from a passive subject into an active exploration of the past. Mindful teaching and effective retrieval strategies ensure deeper understanding, while critical pedagogy empowers students to question, analyze, and engage with history meaningfully. A reformed approach will not only make history more compelling but also shape independent thinkers who can navigate the world with insight and perspective.

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