



The weakness in the teaching of social science in school lies in assessment. The assessments today often are an evaluation of the student's ability to retain and recall information - names and dates, given characteristics of a period, causes of an event, incidents in the event itself and the results of an event all of which have been listed in the textbook. In this article I will explore what we need to assess in social science and how we need to do it using the teaching-learning of history. I choose history because I am familiar with it. I choose it also because the teaching and learning of history seems to have little to do with the practical and the everyday. It is easier for the teacher and student to see practical possibilities in civics and geography. Most are able to conceive of civics as practice and geography as practical with its links to science. I do hope that it will be evident indirectly in the course of the article that the understanding of one invariably includes aspects of the other two.

What Needs to be Assessed and How

Teaching must inextricably be linked with learning and assessment. If my concern is that students should learn the information in the textbook so that they are able to recall and write responses to questions the details they have studied from the book, then my teaching will and must necessarily suit this purpose. I will explain the chapter in detail to the class and give the students skills to master this content so that they are able to recall details when asked. However, if I were to assess the student's ability to learn and understand, I would teach my students very different skills and abilities. I would teach them how to observe carefully, how to read thoroughly and how to think through what is observed or read. I would teach them to question and I would talk about the necessity to be open.

Observation

Observation is a key skill in learning history. It is significant because when you observe a map or a picture you are learning about what it depicts directly or first hand, and not through another's interpretation be it that of a historian or a textbook writer.

On a study visit to Hampi, students were asked to examine the relief sculptures on the sides of the platform

of the Mahanavami Dibba commemorating court life during the times of Krishnadevaraya. One relief shows elephants uprooting trees. Another shows deer scattering as huntsmen shoot their arrows. A question that was put to thirteen year olds observing and writing about what they saw is: What indication do you have of the landscape before Hampi became the capital of Vijayanagara? This question invites the students to examine the sculpted pictures carefully and through observation, which is their own, come upon what could be a likely fact - that the region was deeply forested.

What else in the area among the ruins of Hampi would indicate that they were right? Much of the structures are bases with no super structures but with indentations which could mean that there were pillars at regular intervals. Might these pillars have been made of wood? Are the pillars not there because they were made of wood and must have been burnt or looted? For it has been learnt that that after the Battle of Talikota, the capital of Vijayanagara burned for six days and was later looted and plundered. The initial observation is thus applied to another situation and the details connected and confirmed through a third source. The student thus has learnt to learn and this learning she will be able to apply in other contexts and situations both in her study and in life.

These same skills of observation and making connections can be applied to learning about Mesopotamia. The map of the area reveals two rivers flowing through the land from the hills to the gulf. The areas along the rivers are low lying and much further away are hills. A close examination and a number of questions would help students understand the main occupations, local economy, material used for construction, and the frequency of battles. What the student is encouraged to do here is to observe and place his observations in the framework of her experience and knowledge of human life. From here he makes inferences which he could then corroborate or dismiss.

Take a remarkable book that I came across, simplifying Human Rights for young students called 'We are Born Free.'

An illustrator represents Article 11 which states that nobody ought to be accused of doing anything wrong without being asked about it first. This he does through a picture showing a child with a stem of flowers in her hand and a fallen vase on the floor. There is water spilt from the vase and more stems of flowers fallen next to it. Next to the child are two pairs of adult legs. An observation of this picture and a discussion can help students recall similar experiences, tell us how we conclude so easily, and inform us of our prejudices. Questions such as - 'Has this happened to you?', 'Recall a time when you misjudged someone' 'Try and suggest how this might have happened.' 'How do advertisements, serials and popular films portray wrong or evil?' Thus, Human Right is learnt and understood in a meaningful way.

What is taught, learnt and assessed in the three examples are the skills of observation, of making connections, of application and the responsibility to confirm one's findings. In this teaching of the skills, the content is learnt through direct, personal experience, as it were. Therefore, teaching and learning happen together and assessment happens through the very act of learning. The assessment is then not a conclusive statement but a pointer to what more needs to be taught and learnt. This essentially should be the role of assessment.

How to Think

Thinking rightly is the most complex aspect in the teaching-learning of history. Facts are wrapped in myth, legend and opinions. It is important to see stories with supernatural beings that explain natural or social phenomena as different from an unauthenticated traditional story of a specific historical place or person; and both as different from stories of past events that can be corroborated with evidence.

An opinion is much harder to separate from the statement of the historical 'fact' backed by evidence. When a textbook states about the ruler of the Delhi Sultanate, 'Razia's weakness was that she was born a woman', or 'Ashoka weakened the country by preaching ahimsa,' it is important for the teacher to deconstruct the statement, place it in context and point to the students a way to think through these statements.

Next, we see that in placing certain facts in the textbook and omitting others, a version of the past and of human life is created. Nationalism is based on a partial interpretation of the past and history is used to construct the identity of a region

or nation. This learning of selected movements, people and facts creates a particular world view. It is not unusual to find in textbooks of history, a chapter on what is referred to as the advent of Islam where the raids from Ghazni and Ghori and the battles and brutalities that took place in northern Gangetic plains are described. In the same books there is almost no mention of the years of peaceful living of groups of people along the Malabar Coast. An understanding of history as a study of conquest and conflict gets accepted and dangerously groups of people get characterized in particular ways. What view of the past and human life would this leave the student with?

The teaching of world history mostly revolves around war and conflict in Europe and the United States. In this emphasis, some parts of the world acquire dominance; war and conflict get internalized as worthy of historical memory. Quite powerfully and non-verbally it gets impressed upon growing student minds that war is an inevitable part of human life. The generalized statements in the textbooks about caste and how women were treated badly gloss over issues that affect every day living and must require critical engagement. These generalities couch important aspects of history that need to be understood. Views of human life and the world we live in are thus shaped. In the history classes questions about what we see and read and the difference between what is seen and read, experienced, heard of and thought must be raised. It is in examining these gaps that real learning takes place.



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Further, in the classroom the student needs to be helped to see a historical fact in context. At what period did the historian write? Is there evidence of an ideological position?

What was the contemporary political, economic and social situation at the period she wrote? What was her purpose in writing? Thus it is important to see that although history seems to represent an external reality, we are actually dealing with representations - narratives determined by the views of the dominant group, class, race or gender. Human consciousness is shaped by beliefs, values and ways of thinking and feeling through which human beings perceive and by which recourse they seek to explain what they take to be reality.

What the student needs is a taste of the rich complexity of history. What needs to be taught, learnt and assessed then, is the student's capacity to draw conclusions based on evidence, to understand that this conclusion needs to be held tentatively because it has been constructed not only from available evidence but also from one's own thoughts of how things are and must be. What the student needs to learn is to hold multiple and sometimes contradictory narratives and divergent views without conflict. More than what to think teachers need to teach how to think.

How is this to be done? One activity often given to students is the 'pot burial' activity. The class is divided into groups of students. Each group collects items, keeping in mind a particular section of a house or structure, and places them in a pot and buries the pot. Another group locates the pot through a given map or the creation of a mound and unearths the pot and examines the find as evidence and draws conclusions from this available 'evidence' about the period and lifestyle of the inhabitants. The evidence and the conclusion are then presented to the class. In this, some things become apparent. There is faulty thinking because the object has not been sufficiently examined or the thinking was incomplete. Thinking is biased when it is based on the present day realities of the student and there is insufficient imagination, perhaps. Finally, it could also be seen that the intention of the students who buried the pot and the conclusion drawn by another group of students may not be the same.

Examining multiple materials on one subject is an excellent teaching tool - a document of the period, a contemporary newspaper article, and varied views of two historians writing at different times. What are the differences? The reasons for the differences could teach one how to think. In a related manner, the newspaper reflecting events of the present

forms effective material for the study of history! Why do all newspapers choose to print the same stories on the front page? Why are these events considered significant? On what fact is each story based? In what ways do the stories differ from each other? What kinds of events are least reported?

It is important to use distortions, omissions and differences as steps to learning how to think. Sometimes, an entire history and a serious lesson to be learnt is held in the use of one word, for instance, the word 'discovered.' When we teach that Columbus 'discovered' America we need to ask who the speaker is and for whom he discovered it because there were people already living there. In this one word lies the whole history of power, the reasons for the disappearance of a rich and different history, extinction and forcible assimilation. The word 'primitive' for instance has connotations of inferior and ignorant and 'progress' has positive connotations. These world views held in single words will perpetuate and young students will not think any differently unless they learn to examine and question these words and concepts.

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Through exposure to material and through questions, then, the students learn to think. There is a great confidence when a student knows that he can think for himself. Usually education in school teaches you what to think and not how to think. And it is through thinking that students grow into creative human beings and not repetitive machines. It is this ability to think that we need to nurture and assess.

Questioning

Through observation and learning how to think the student gains an understanding of the past and insights into the processes of history. Learning history also means trying to understand how societies work and seeing that this understanding is equally applicable to grasp the happenings

of the present day. History is most significant in that it helps us with ways of understanding the present and its skills apply to situations and information encountered in everyday life. Such learning would enable a student to hone the tools of thinking and evaluation that he has and use them over an impulsive and uninformed rush to decision and judgment.

How is this to be taught, learnt and assessed? If history is a way of understanding the present, then a good place to begin is the present. A classroom discussion could begin with asking why English is the medium of instruction in schools in India? Why do students in Indian schools wear pinafores, ties and socks and shoes? What ideas about childhood and what adult concerns formed our present day educational classroom? This leads to history that is relevant.

Even the study of a syllabus of a history course allows the students to begin with the questions they have. 'The rise and growth of British Power, The Ascendency of British Power, The Consolidation of British Power' stated in the syllabus could provoke in students questions such as - Why did the British travel to India? If there were so many Indians how did a small group of British acquire power and grow to consolidate it as well? What was the response of the people in India to what was happening? These are essential questions and learning begins from where the students are. There are other kinds of questions born of the need to understand the present through the past that could surface in a discussion - How do we understand the emotional surge that led to the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya?

This interplay between the past and present is as natural as it is essential. Here are questions that were raised after a year of studying medieval and early modern India to help students think, connect and respond in an essay:

The Struggle for Power

Introduction: How do you understand 'power'? Why does a king need power?

Further Questions

- Under what specific conditions does a king have to prove himself? (Rajput theories of origin, Qutb-ud-din Aibak, Babur and Humayun, Shivaji)
- How does a king keep his power? (Chola kings, Balban, Alauddin Khalji, Krisnadevaraya, Akbar, Aurangzeb)
- What is the impact of power on the kings themselves?

(Alauddin Khalji and Muhammad bin Tughluq, Jahangir and Shah Jahan) How does this struggle for power affect relationships with others and what happens within oneself?

- What is the sadness here? (Razia, the Bahmini kings, the wars of succession among the Mughals, Aurangzeb's ascension to the throne)

Conclusion:

Write your own thoughts on what you have studied.

Assessment Tasks

What might some assessment tasks look like if the assessment task is not an activity, group work or a field visit but a written examination? Here are some tasks drawn from what has been stated so far but randomly chosen:

Question 1:

Examine the following picture of a tomb painting in ancient Egypt carefully and answer the following questions:

What three activities do you see the people engaged in?

Describe the tools used.

Why do you think the people are shown in different sizes? Explain your reasons.

Question 2:

Below is a newspaper story. What human right is referred to? State the right and explain how it is violated here.

Question 3:

Here are two extracts from historians about the Black Hole incident in Calcutta. What are the similarities in the writer's reports? What might you ascertain as the facts?

Question 4:

Marked on the given map is an area. Study the map carefully and answer the following questions:

- *What would the occupation of the people be? Why?*
- *What leisure activities might they pursue? What gives you an indication?*
- *Why might trade be an important activity in this region?*
- *With which areas might there have been contact?*

- *What crops do you predict might grow in this region?*

State your reasons.

Three things are clear in the tasks above. First, the student is required to read or study a given picture, map or text. She then has to place this information in the framework of knowledge that she already has and think clearly. She then has to articulate her observation and thinking in careful writing. Second, in the course of the task she becomes the creator of the answer and works on it with confidence. Third, and most significant, the student learns something new in skill or knowledge through the exercise, or acquires an insight. Any assessment task that the student does not learn from is at best incomplete and meaningless.

Beyond Assessment

Having said all that I have about how assessment in the social sciences can be made meaningful, I now wish to state

that the most essential things that must be taught and learnt through the social sciences cannot be assessed.

The essential learning from social science must be to learn to live and relate rightly - to learn silent non-judgmental observation, to grow aware of the working of ideologies, of our nervous and emotional responses to words, ideas and events, to learn to hold diverse points of view in our minds without conflict. The learning must help us engage with the realities of everyday life with clarity and ask what our responsibilities are, it must free us from prejudice and create the ground for self questioning.

The goal of the learning of social science, in my view, is two-fold. It is to teach us through the human affairs of another place and time, to know ourselves in the here and now. It is to enable a caring relationship with the human, animal and natural environment around us. Knowledge and skill are valuable only when embedded in a relationship of care and responsibility. And this is beyond assessment.

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