

Suffrage, feudal, democracy, treaty... history's building blocks: learning to teach historical c o n c e p t s

In the UK, thoughtful history teachers have long lamented the fact that the majority of pupils emerge from their compulsory history schooling at 14 with a limited or inadequate understanding of those key historical concepts that are necessary to make sense of the world in adult life. Whilst more able pupils seem to pick things up quite well through the traditional array of teaching methods, we all know that, worryingly, the majority remain too ignorant or too unsophisticated in their understandings to participate fully as active, independent, critical citizens in a democracy. Much recent practice in the last ten years or so has begun to address this. In the UK a body of practice and professional literature now exists on ways of helping pupils to link, arrange, classify, use labels, create new headings and play with shifting categories (such as approaches to 'thinking skills' that emphasise classification, to analytical writing in history or to 'word level' work in the National Literacy Strategy). Yet three key areas remain undeveloped, or at the very least, not widely discussed by UK teachers. These are, first, the processes by which trainee teachers come to realise the massive gap between their own conceptual vocabulary and that of their very different pupils; second, ways of classifying historical concepts for the purposes of teaching; and, third, fresh ways of developing and *assessing* 'deep' understanding in pupils – the kind of understanding that will last and that will help to anchor new knowledge. Jacques Haenen and Hubert Schrijnemakers address each of these areas in a fascinating analysis of current practice of initial teacher education in the Netherlands. This article will be of particular interest to mentors, trainers and managers of trainee teachers or newly qualified teachers; to heads of department developing their thinking about the role of concepts and knowledge in their progression policies; and to Advanced Skills Teachers looking for new ways of developing *others'* pedagogical thinking in order to improve performance.

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Introduction

In our teacher education courses we discuss with the student teachers educationally relevant topics from the field of learning theory. To student teachers of history one of these topics is the acquisition of historical concepts. It is our purpose to teach them how to guide their pupils when constructing historical concepts. Through practical experiences and

classroom assignments, the student teachers become aware of some of the problems that can arise when teachers convey ready-made concepts to be learnt by heart by their pupils. Student teachers have to learn the difference between pupils who really understand an historical concept and pupils who only repeat words without full conceptual understanding. Practice teaches us that such undigested knowledge is of no use to pupils and rapidly evaporates.¹

Usually, student teachers are not familiar with our approach to the teaching-learning process. Their understanding is based only on their own subjective theories on teaching.² They tend to see knowledge as a pre-existing whole, and teaching as the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the pupils. They think that pupils' learning will automatically follow when the teacher explains the subject matter well. According to this view, the teacher should reformulate and 'translate' the subject matter in order to make it understandable and accessible to pupils. The student teachers have distilled this idea about teaching from the lessons of their former teachers at secondary schools and colleges. However, in current education, the teacher's task focuses on guiding the pupils' learning process. In the Netherlands, there is a general belief that schools have to evolve into real communities of learners.

Through school practice assignments, the student teachers get an understanding of the pupils' learning processes. Through these assignments, the teacher educator provides them with opportunities to acquire useful experiences resulting in a new view on teaching. The assignments are embedded in practical situations, which are experienced by the student teacher both as problematic and realistic. This approach to teacher education creates the conditions for reflection on these practical experiences. In this way at least some of their hidden views on teaching become visible. This is the context in which we discuss with the student teachers the teaching and learning of historical concepts.

Practical assignments

At the very beginning of the course, the teacher educator tells the student teacher to prepare a five-minute lesson focusing on explaining an historical concept to fellow students. This exercise takes place at the institute and is meant to offer useful experiences without the complexities of lessons at school. One student teacher starts the lesson as follows:

'Parliamentary democracy consists of the words parliament and democracy. Parliament is derived from parler, the French word for speaking, and democracy is originally a Greek word made up of demos – the people – and kratein, which means to reign. Thus, the meaning of democracy is that the people reign, at least the people may participate in decision making. That is an advantage, but there is also a drawback connected with democracy: if everyone has a say in the

decision, then discord will soon appear; it takes too much time and it can all end in chaos. Can you imagine that everybody would take part in politics? That's why they found a solution in the choosing of representatives of the people.'

Continuing his five-minute lesson, the student teacher explains 'suffrage' and its conditions, direct election of the members of the Dutch Second Chamber, election by indirect vote of the members of the First Chamber and the possibility of electing the prime minister.

The concept appears to have been clearly outlined. After further reflection, however, the student teacher expresses discontent: 'It's such a complex matter, it cannot be conveyed within five minutes.' Confronted with this situation, he reacts somewhat dejectedly and is uncertain about the alternatives. To explain the concept 'parliamentary democracy' requires more time. So, given the limited time, a less complex educational objective for the explanation of this concept needs to be chosen. This consideration, shared with the fellow students, is followed by a new assignment giving the opportunity to illustrate clearly which choices have to be made. Another student teacher prepares a five-minute lesson about 'constituencies' and the conceptual twin 'proportional representation / geographical representation'. Examining the possibilities of reducing the explanation leads her to the reflection that

'explanation about details like gerrymandering has to be ignored in the first instance, because I have to deal with the main points first. Because of the complexity of the concepts I cannot explain them at one go. I don't think it will be sensible to give a definition. In order to make it understandable to the pupils, I need a concrete example of an imaginary country divided into districts.'

The discussion after the five-minute lesson reveals that, in addition to the limitation of objectives, a pedagogically different presentation should be used. Use of blackboard or overhead projector is indispensable: 'Without a drawn example the subject matter cannot be explained.' A second conclusion refers to the fact that giving pupils a definition of a concept does not automatically equal comprehension. Moreover, the student teacher wonders if such concepts are too difficult to understand for pupils aged 14-15. What do they already know and what

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Building concepts: A trainee teacher in the Netherlands attempts to anchor a difficult historical concept in the pupils' memory by giving them an active role in developing understanding.

can a teacher add to that? These questions and reflections serve as a basis to reconstruct the student teachers' views on the teaching-learning processes involved in the formation of historical concepts in the classroom.

We felt it necessary to put aside the more theoretical approaches and to propose a clustering which is understandable to pupils as well. We want to make clear to the student teachers in our teacher education courses how to understand and teach historical concepts in the classroom.

Types of historical concepts

History is a concept-driven subject. Therefore, we need some kind of clustering of the overwhelming number of concepts within this field. We have to distinguish between three types of historical concepts involved in history teaching:

1. everyday concepts
2. unique historical concepts
3. inclusive historical concepts

We must emphasise that our clustering is based on a predominantly practical and educationally relevant approach to history teaching. In the literature one can find tentative solutions for the awkward problem of how to cluster into types of historical concepts.³

First of all, there are concepts with an 'everyday' content, which are frequently used in an historical context (e.g., universal, heritage, style). These everyday concepts are not specifically historical, but often play a role in learning about the past and in developing historical understanding and inquiry. As regards proper historical concepts, we distinguish between unique and inclusive concepts. A unique concept is a construct that applies to a thing, person, event or period, each of which is the only one to which the name in question applies. Thus D-Day, France, Napoleon are unique concepts. On the other hand, there are inclusive concepts (castle, source, king, parliament, depression) that cover instances to which these names apply. The distinction between singulars (unique concepts) and universals (inclusive concepts) goes back to Aristotle.⁴ Below, we will discuss these three types of historical concepts and the implications for the teaching and learning of history.

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Everyday concepts

Teaching practice provides the student teacher with excellent opportunities to become aware of how pupils cope with common, everyday concepts occurring in a history lesson. One of the school assignments directly confronting student teachers with this aspect of concept learning, runs as follows:

- Give the pupils a school book text and have them list the concepts that appear to be difficult. What are the results and what attracts your attention?
- What kind of help did you give the pupils in order to overcome their difficulties in learning these concepts?

One of the student teachers noticed that her pupils often do not have a clear idea of everyday concepts as 'to agree with' and 'messenger'. She had not expected her pupils to know such historical concepts as 'feudal' and 'investiture', but the pupils' vague knowledge of common everyday concepts surprised her.

Teacher educator: 'What kind of help did you give your pupils to make them understand the meaning of 'messenger'? Did you give a straightforward answer or did you try to structure the pupils' efforts in trying to grasp its meaning?'

Student teacher: 'It's simply that the pupils didn't read properly. I take the view that they do know such words. I'm not going to ask: 'Who knows what a messenger is?' You have to take them somewhat seriously! If they don't understand such words, I assume they fail to comprehend their meaning at that particular moment. After taking a closer look at the sentence, they will understand it simply by using the context, because they already knew it.'

Teacher educator: 'So, your help consists of pointing at the context as an important help.'

In the discussion, the student teachers mention several possibilities for offering help to pupils with problems of understanding the meaning of everyday concepts, such as: pupils could by themselves get the meaning of a concept by using the context; one could ask the student to read the relevant sentence(s) again or help

by supplying a hint; the student could also consult other pupils or the library. Whatever the method, one could stimulate the pupils to become somehow actively involved in the unknown concepts. By doing so, the student teacher uses insights from learning theory. Giving the pupils an active role in the process of concept formation helps anchor the concept in the pupils' memories. As a result, the concept will be more easily retrieved and applied in new contexts.

For the student teacher this is an important stage towards preparing a sequence of lessons, especially during the teaching practice period when they will have full responsibility for all of the history lessons in 'their own' classes over a period of several months. Then, it will no longer seem satisfactory to them just to give a straightforward definition. A mere explanation will not be sufficient either. The pupils have to construct their own notions of a concept ('something has to be behind it') and to give it a personal meaning. Such an approach to the formation of historical concepts enhances the student teachers' sensitivity to a process-oriented and constructivist view of teaching and learning. Activating prior knowledge and in-depth processing of concepts only happen if the pupils really identify with the content to be learned. Such an educational objective demands long-term curriculum planning with carefully designed learning and elaboration tasks.

Unique historical concepts

A process-oriented view of learning will be strengthened by reflection on the nature of historical concepts. These can be divided into unique and inclusive concepts. Unlike Gunning we think that 'Napoleon I' is a concept, although he was one of a kind.⁵ The teachers in classrooms often deal with these 'unique historical concepts': persons like Churchill or Stalin, periods like the Middle Ages or the third century BC, events like the Battle of Hastings or the Peace of Westfalia. While inclusive concepts subsume a group of objects with the same features, unique concepts apply to just one object. Only metaphorically can such a concept be used in another context. For example, in the Netherlands, Rembrandt's Nightwatch has recently been associated with Mondrian's Victory Boogie Woogie, now nicknamed 'The Nightwatch of the Twentieth Century'. Likewise, the concept Renaissance has been used to designate the flowering of the Carolingian Renaissance.

Unique concepts as such play a key role in history education. It is typical of these concepts that it is difficult – even impossible – to give a strict definition without neglecting some of their essential features.

Giving the pupils an active role in the process of concept formation helps anchor the concept in the pupils' memories

Figure 1 Five elements in a concept

Five elements in a concept	
1.	a <u>name</u> is given to a category or class of experiences, objects, events or processes; think of such names as citizen, federation, and treaty.
2.	<u>examples</u> (positive or negative) refer to the instances where the concept may or may not be used. Windsor Castle and the Gravensteen in Gent are positive examples of a castle, whereas Versailles is not a castle, but a palace.
3.	<u>attributes</u> are the common and essential features leading us to the decision to subsume examples within the same category. The function of castles is to defend and to shelter; form, construction materials or the presence of towers, steeples or belfries are not essential attributes, however determinant they may be to the image of a particular castle. Consequently, knowing a concept also means to be able to distinguish essential attributes from the non-essential ones.
4.	the <u>value range</u> of attributes. The examples of a concept are not standardised. In many centuries castles were built and they all look quite different. Nevertheless, we call them all castles. However, American castle-like buildings constructed in the twentieth century can hardly be called castles, because they lack any defensive functions. We speak of the acceptable variation of a given attribute as its value range.
5.	A <u>rule</u> specifies the essential attributes and the connection between them. For example, a guild is an association of people who share an interest in a craft, business or profession. Within the teaching-learning process, a rule is a provisional working definition or statement that has to be further elaborated in the course of the pupils' gradual grasping and understanding of the concept elements.

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This peculiar property of unique historical concepts is generally acknowledged: these concepts cannot be described exhaustively. For example, the definition of the Middle Ages as 'the period between 476 and 1492 AD' ignores that specific flavour of 'the violent tenor of life', pointing to the multi-colouredness and the romantic aspect of that period.⁶ A definition of the Middle Ages should be a description, but even this would be both too complex and yet still incomplete. For although the concept 'the Middle Ages' can be circumscribed, it can never be completely defined. That unique historical concepts are ill-definable, turns history into a 'discussion without an end'⁷; historians are continuously reinterpreting the past, which leads to the shifting content of history education. Each generation newly writes its own history and constructs its historical images differently. For those living in 1660, the death of Charles I had a different meaning from that held in 1760.

Unique concepts are the building blocks of history education. Often the pupils have constructed images (perceptions and mental pictures) of these concepts in the course of elementary education, by watching television or by inference from other sources. These images are vague and nondescript, built up from incidental experiences and one's own imagination. Nevertheless, they lay the foundation for the specific knowledge content. Hence stories and pictures contribute more to mental representation than definitions, because they appeal to the pupils' own imagination and feelings. To a large extent, history teaching therefore has to rely on the pupils' own construction abilities to get at the historical concepts. This means that the history teacher must create a 'construction zone' to give the pupils ample opportunities to construct (under the teacher's guidance) their own historical concepts.

This is more easily said than done. There is no exclusive way of creating a construction zone in classroom practice. One way or the other, it starts by capturing the pupils' attention and mobilising their prior knowledge. This is a demanding aspect of teaching history; it asks for skilled teaching activity and it should be quite deliberately practised.

Inclusive historical concepts

Next to unique historical concepts, there are inclusive historical concepts bringing together a set (a class or category) of distinct objects. The study of concepts as categories is a well developed domain within learning theory. What these concepts are, and how people acquire them, are issues that researchers have explored. Concepts are the building blocks of human thought. They reduce the complexity of the environment and

enable us to respond efficiently to it. But most historical concepts that are part of the pupils' knowledge repertoire are learned and constructed in the course of education. The learning of inclusive concepts consists essentially of a process of abstraction, because an inclusive concept refers to the essential common features of a class of objects. At first sight it may be a class of rather arbitrary objects (e.g., castles may look quite different). However, when carefully compared, they can be seen to share features. Concepts are helpful in identifying regularities: they refer to these common features of objects. In order to expand this notion of a concept in the direction of teaching and learning, and in order to improve the quality of instruction for concept learning, we must distinguish five elements in any concept.⁸ These are shown in Figure 1.

These five elements can be further illustrated if we outline Joyce et al.'s proposal of how to teach concepts in the classroom.⁹ First, the teacher leads the pupils through an exercise giving them the opportunity to describe a concept in terms of the essential and non-essential attributes and to list positive and negative examples. The pupils consider different concepts and think and talk about their elements. For this purpose, a form may be used as a pupils' exercise page (see figure 2). In this form particular blanks are designated to fill in the details about the elements of a concept. We also used this form as a preparation tool for the student teachers' lessons in which concepts are discussed and conveyed to the pupils.

The rule or working definition in the form is provisional. Many questions can and have to be asked in order to make the usually somewhat abstract character of a rule more tangible. Here lies the practical relevance of the use of such a pupils' exercise form. The enumeration of the elements and the weighting of what has to be considered as positive or negative give rise to a working definition leading on to new questions. And as the proverb says: 'A good question is half the answer'. By discussing questions like 'Is the American Revolution an example of decolonization?' the pupils experience the boundaries of a concept and must specify it further. Working along these lines the student teachers begin to understand better how the pupils' concept formation can be fostered and how a lesson plan can be made for this purpose.

The instructed acquisition of concepts

The acquisition of the three types of concepts (everyday concepts, unique and inclusive historical concepts) demands of the teacher a process-oriented approach to the pupils' learning. The essence of such an approach is in the pupils' learning activities

stories and pictures contribute more to mental representation than definitions

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Figure 2:
Form to fill in the elements of a concept, illustrated with the concept 'decolonization'

name of the concept	decolonization	
examples	<p>positive (= matches the rule)</p> <p>Foundation of the State of Israël</p> <p>Mahatma Gandhi's political actions</p> <p>Proclamation of the Republic of Indonesia</p>	<p>negative (= does not match the rule)</p> <p>The Dutch Revolt</p> <p>War between India and Pakistan</p> <p>Abdication of the Shah of Persia</p>
features	<p>No national sovereignty</p> <p>Before a colony, dominated by the motherland</p>	No relation of motherland and colony
values	In the twentieth century	Before the twentieth century
rule (= working definition)	Decolonization = Territories that were colonies before becoming independent states in the twentieth century.	

scaffolded by teachers' providing powerful learning environments. A central aspect of a powerful learning environment is the pupils' capacity to regulate and monitor their own learning. This may serve as a suitable context for the acquisition of concepts. Based on their own images of a concept, however limited this may be ('the Age of Chivalry'), and on the concrete examples from their own experiences, the pupils construct their understanding of a concept. As a consequence, a full-fledged definition will never be reached and is, as a matter of fact, a non-attainable goal. A process-oriented approach to the acquisition of concepts will always yield incomplete results, too. This is simply characteristic of what, after all, historical conceptions are all about. They are provisional definitions depending on the context in which they come into being.¹⁰ The student teachers have to learn how to guide their pupils in the process of their gradual construction of meaningful concepts. These are concepts linked with their prior knowledge and geared to the pupils' everyday lives. In this discussion important pedagogical notions come up about how to do this in the classroom. We make use of the student teachers' preliminary practical classroom experiences to discuss inductively the pedagogical notions essential to the learning of historical concepts. At least three notions are essential¹¹:

1. Constructing meaning by linking new information to prior knowledge. In interpreting new information, it is undoubtedly of the utmost importance that the pupils use the knowledge they already possess.
2. Learning goes gradually and step by step. Concepts are so complex that the teacher has to outline carefully the steps in the teaching-learning process. The teacher helps the pupils to store new information by a sequence of short exercises, discussions and explanations. In doing so, the teacher helps the pupils gradually to fill in and elaborate on the preliminary working definition of a concept.
3. To truly make the new information their own, the pupils should be helped in organising and practising it. This can be done by using the above mentioned form to fill in the elements of a concept or with the help of concept maps, that can also be used as blackboard schemes.

Of course, these pedagogical notions should not be considered in isolation. They have to be used in combination in order to achieve the necessary integration of knowledge within the pupil. To this end, history teachers have developed a variety of exercises for practical use in the classroom, such as

- concept mapping to activate prior knowledge of the subject that pupils bring to the classroom;
- precoded schemes for structuring the context of texts;
- visualising relations between concepts, for example by the use of timebars or genealogical trees.

In current educational literature, two useful instruments are especially mentioned. First, the pupils' reflection on the subject matter makes knowledge useful and available in new contexts (transfer). This can be achieved by having the pupils at the end of one or more lessons (orally or in writing) answer questions like: what are the main points of a lesson, what should be remembered, what are the key concepts, what kind of questions are there, what should be the topic of the next lesson, what conclusions have to be drawn? The pupils can do this on their own or collaboratively. This brings us to a second instrument at the teacher's proposal, viz. cooperative learning. There is growing evidence that working together, thinking aloud and elaborating explanations together with fellow-pupils may be positively related to pupils' achievements. Student teachers have to learn how to use these instruments in their classrooms. This will lead to an improved understanding of the complex content of historical concepts. From the student teachers this requires a more process-oriented approach. We have illustrated, above, how we have introduced this approach to the teaching-learning process in the teacher education courses at Utrecht University.

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By discussing questions the pupils experience the boundaries of a concept and must specify it further