How to design lessons about the sensitive past? The web of perspectives

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Introduction

In Italy as well as the Netherlands the sensitive edges of national history have recently sparked off a public debate. Both countries have seen controversies on commemoration and the role of monuments, whether of Dutch naval heroes or Risorgimento icons. The disputes on projects to found historical museums dedicated to highly delicate issues like slavery in the Netherlands or fascism in Italy are still raging. Their legacies of colonialism challenge both countries to teach this sensitive past from multiple perspectives, doing justice to today's globalized world and multicultural societies. Present debates in media and politics on immigration or Islam urge educators to reflect on their didactics concerning topics such as emigration, the Holocaust or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. History teachers do not function in a vacuum, but are often confronted with conflicting societal issues in the classroom. During these tense situations history teachers in Europe are expected to teach competences of democratic citizenship, such as tolerance, perspective taking, and critical thinking (Council of Europe, 2018). However, when teachers are faced with sensitive issues these competences can come under pressure and teachers can feel unsure how to react. We as authors have witnessed the need of teachers to develop their competences to teach about controversial historical topics.

In February 2019, a symposium was organized in Rome by dr. Asker Pelgrom (Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome) and dr. Bjorn Wansink (Utrecht University, The Netherlands), named *The sensitive past, history & heritage education in Italy and the Netherlands.* Its aim was to explore how Italian and Dutch researchers, teachers and teacher educators deal with

the sensitive past in history education, museum education and heritage education. This paper discusses a selection of the research insights, educational designs and materials that were presented at the symposium. In this article we will first provide a conceptual overview of what sensitive history is. In the second part of the article a proposal is made for a 'web of perspectives,' which can be used as a practical tool for designing history lessons about sensitive topics. We will explain the tool and provide examples how it can be used to develop lessons. The tool is based on the current goals of, and challenges in history education in the Netherlands, and is based upon insights gained from research as well as Dutch educational practice in secondary schools and teacher education.

Conceptualizing and discussing the sensitive past

When talking about sensitive issues in history education, it is important to understand that the sensitivity is always context-bound. What is considered to be sensitive differs between people and changes over time and place. For example, historical topics that are not controversial in academia or the dominant majority's public realm could become controversial or sensitive in classrooms with many pupils of different migrant backgrounds. Or, due to regional differences, what is considered to be sensitive in Italy may not be sensitive in the Netherlands. When we refer to sensitive topics, we distinguish three features, which we will explain using the topic of slavery (Sheppard, 2010): (1) a topic refers to a traumatic event and includes a focus on suffering, violence and the oppression of groups of people. For the topic of slavery this is certainly the case with regard to the historical events and system of slavery. Furthermore, many examples of inequality and discrimination in current Dutch society relate back to slavery in the past and are thus often considered as a part of the topic of slavery when discussed in the classroom; (2) There is some form of identification between those who study history and those who are represented based on their perceived social identities (Tajfel, 1982). Such identification often leads to neglecting particular perspectives and overemphasizing others. For example, people who identify as Dutch may want to silence the actions of Dutch slave trade companies and Dutch plantation owners because these actions pose a threat to their social identity and the positive moral image of their group (Bar-Tal, 2017); (3) There is a moral response to the topic in the present. For example, when teaching about slavery from a present perspective, pupils may feel the need to prevent such events from happening again or even to repair past wrongdoings (Savenije, Van Boxtel & Grever, 2014; Leone & Sarrica, 2017).

Sensitive topics, such as slavery, are often silenced in some way, by governments or in curricula, or by social groups or self-censorship of individual teachers (Savenije & Goldberg, 2019). For example, a teacher may deny the existence of contrary perspectives on slavery in a multicultural class due to fear of heated discussions or the wish to protect a belief or value (Brauch, Leone & Sarrica 2019). These social or political silences and denials are always in some way the product of conscious choices to not know (Cohen, 2001; Connerton, 2008; Winter, 2010). It is thus important that history teachers become aware of societal and self-silencing of sensitive issues and are committed to voicing and giving a voice to pupils (Savenije & Goldberg, 2019).

Classroom discussions about sensitive topics such as slavery are an essential component of education for democratic citizenship, because they encourage pupils to become critical and active participants (Oulton et al., 2004). Sensitive topics provide opportunities for learning and can contribute to the development of skills such as forming a reasoned opinion grounded in evidence, and to acknowledge as well as to question critically contrasting perspectives (Goldberg & Savenije, 2018; Wansink et al, 2019). Also pupils themselves think these discussions are important and they often have positive attitudes toward these discussions (Hess & Posselt, 2002).

However, previous research has shown that history teachers often find it difficult to discuss sensitive topics, because of the considerable emotional and intellectual challenges involved (Goldberg, 2017; Savenije & Goldberg, 2019). Teachers can be afraid of the fierceness with which some pupils pose strongly contrasting perspectives. On the one hand, this diversity of perspectives can be an opportunity to teach explicitly about multiperspectivity in history (Goldberg & Savenije, 2018). On the other hand, discussions may easily escalate, because perspectives on the past are often strongly related to one's identity and values (e.g., Epstein, 1998; Peck, 2010). In these tense situations in the classroom pupils can find it difficult to reflect critically on their own perspective and to be open to different, contrasting perspectives (Barton & McCully, 2012; King, 2009).
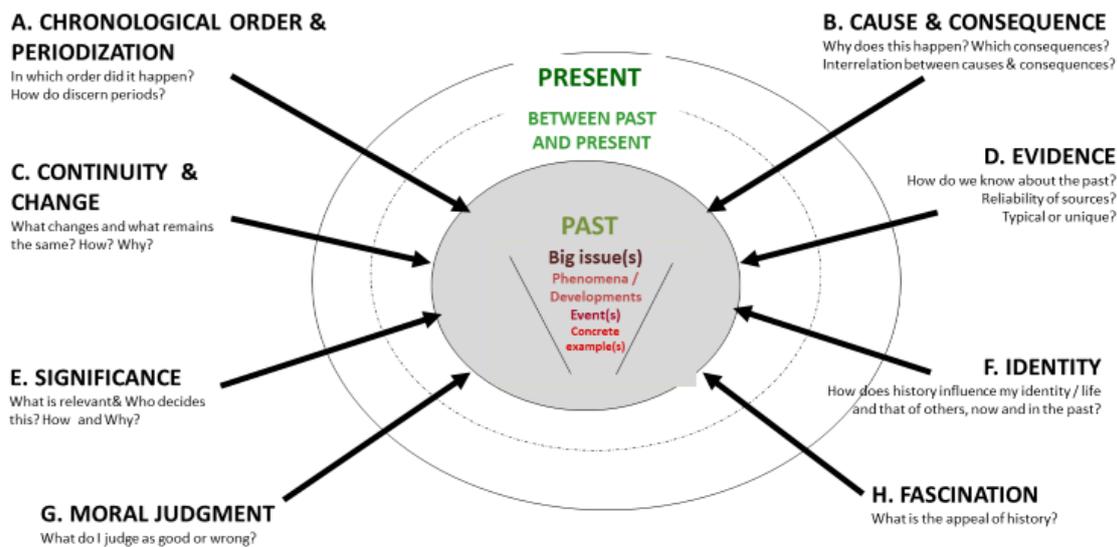
Two crucial factors in teachers' approaches to sensitive topics seem to be the teachers own moral relation towards the topic and teaching expertise. Previous research has shown that the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their attitude towards teaching history from multiple perspectives is topic-dependent and influenced by the perceived sensitivity of the topic (Wansink, Akkerman & Wubbels, 2016). Topics that are perceived as 'cold' history are perceived as easier to discuss from multiple perspectives then topics that are perceived as hot and very sensitive. Moreover, teachers require pedagogical and subject matter expertise to

enable discussions of historical topics from multiple perspectives in which teachers and pupils use contextualisation and source evaluation to ground their arguments in historical evidence (Goldberg and Savenije 2018; Wansink et al, 2018). The demands to teach pupils to reason historically (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008) are challenging to meet for secondary history teachers and might discourage them from even trying. In this context, Kitson and McCully (2005) referred to 'risk-taking' teachers, who view themselves as critical activists and are willing to engage with controversial historical issues to stimulate pupils' critical awareness and to promote social change. To sum it up: dealing with sensitive issues poses major challenges to history teachers. In the following we will provide a tool, which can help teachers to become well prepared 'risk-taking' teachers who can address controversial topics in the classroom and stimulate historical reasoning.

The design tool: the web-of-perspectives

The web of perspectives is a tool developed by Logtenberg, Storck and Wansink (2018) that can help to give attention to both historical reasoning by and personal relevance to the pupils, which are equally important with regard to sensitive topics. It might inspire teachers to a systematic approach of sensitive issues in order to foster a sense of understanding of different narratives and/or change of narratives over time. It helps to make sure that, for each topic, at least one perspective of historical reasoning or one aspect of personal relevance are dealt with. The web of perspectives (see figure 1) has three main parts: (1) the temporal layers represented in the circles; (2) the funnel between abstract and concrete as explained in the inner grey circle; (3) the eight thought directions (A-H). All three main parts we will shortly discuss.

Figure 1: The web of perspectives

A. CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER & PERIODIZATION
In which order did it happen? How do discern periods?

B. CAUSE & CONSEQUENCE
Why does this happen? Which consequences? Interrelation between causes & consequences?

C. CONTINUITY & CHANGE
What changes and what remains the same? How? Why?

D. EVIDENCE
How do we know about the past? Reliability of sources? Typical or unique?

E. SIGNIFICANCE
What is relevant& Who decides this? How and Why?

F. IDENTITY
How does history influence my identity / life and that of others, now and in the past?

G. MORAL JUDGMENT
What do I judge as good or wrong?

H. FASCINATION
What is the appeal of history?

PRESENT

BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

PAST
Big issue(s)
Phenomena / Developments
Event(s)
Concrete example(s)

Three temporal layers

The three circles indicate the difference between the present and the past. The past refers to a historical issue (event, object or person) which is at stake and to contemporary perspectives on this issue. For example, how did contemporary Roman citizens react on the murder of Caesar? The circle between past and present refers to a non-contemporary time layer, that also has a connection with the murder of Caesar (object) and its interpretation, for example Edward Gibbon (1776) writing about the murder of Caesar. The main function of this circle is to make explicit for pupils that historical narratives about historical events can differ over time, depending on the political, socio-cultural and temporal position of the person constructing the narrative. The last circle is the present referring to persons who live in the present, including historians, politicians, history teachers and pupils themselves. The main goal of addressing this temporal layer is to make pupils reflective and critically aware that they are not only consumers of history , but also make their own constructions of the past (Wansink, Akkerman, Zuiker & Wubbels, 2018).

The funnel between abstract and concrete

The major topics in history and the relevant existential questions are abstract. (Young) pupils therefore need concrete examples of historical situations. An important task for a history teacher is to make explicit choices in content and approach. The 'funnel' in the centre of the web can be used as a tool for making connections between concrete examples from the past and larger, more abstract issues and threads. For example, the murder of Caesar can be used as a concrete introduction into more abstract issues such as the Roman Imperium,

governments and (present and past) existential questions about power. As a direct consequence, it is important that teachers specify historical contexts of time and place when covering major topics and developments in history, as well as when dealing with societal topics. This allows pupils to investigate the historical context with increasing precision. Questions about historical objects or people give direction to the act of thinking about more abstract phenomena and developments. The funnel visualizes the notion that major themes and questions can be better understood with knowledge of examples from concrete historical contexts and that, vice versa, concrete historical events, persons, artefacts, developments can be better understood when connected with these major issues (Logtenberg, Storck & Wansink, 2018).

The wedges of the web

The 'wedges' in the web of perspectives visualize the perspectives which function as thought directions, which we can use when studying the past. The web includes eight concepts which are based on the work of Seixas and colleagues (2013) and our own ideas: chronology (A), cause and consequence (B), continuity and change (C), evidence (D), significance (E), identity (F), moral judgement (G) and fascination (H). We understand that each concept is complex, but for reasons of clarification below the approaches of the web-of-perspectives are briefly defined.

(A) Chronology and time

This perspective covers the understanding of historical time and its sequence (eras). Without this understanding it is impossible to categorize the past into eras and use these as a frame of reference. Historical time is organized in narratives (with a beginning and an end) and is, therefore, a different dimension of time than objective time (clock time) or subjective time (how long something seems to take). Important themes are chronology, periodization and anachronism (Wilschut, 2011; De Groot – Reuvekamp, et al., 2014)

Questions associated with this perspective are: How long did this era last? In which order did the eras occur?

(B) Cause and consequence

This perspective covers causal reasoning. For this approach it is important to recognize that cause and consequence are always complex and intertwined: they can differ in strength and can weaken each other, and consequences can be become causes later (Stoel, Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2017). The role of socio-economic, political, governmental and cultural circumstances can be investigated within this perspective as well.

Questions associated with this approach are: What were the short- and long-term effects of an event? What were the several causes, and what if something had not happened? What were the primary causes and consequences? What were the intentions of specific people in the past?

(C) Continuity and change

This approach covers the interconnectivity of events that stay the same throughout time and those that change over time. It could cover an insight into speed and rhythm, for instance for some revolutions the resulting changes are evident, whereas for others it is harder to discern what has changed (Counsell, 2011). What for one person feels as change, others experience as a continuity. A different aspect is appreciation: what for one person is progress, others may experience as decline. Furthermore, it is important that pupils understand that change over time is a process, and that some changes did not happen overnight.

Questions associated with this approach are: Why did something change when other things did not? Which turning points in a development can be distinguished?

(D) Evidence

Histories pretend to be reconstructions of the past based on sources. This approach covers the use of sources and evidence to carefully consider the use of information in and on sources: how has the story been constructed? Pupils are expected to be able to demonstrate their insight into reconstructions of the past by deconstructing these, using different/new source material or ask different/new questions to those sources. It is less common, but not unheard of, for pupils to be expected to reconstruct the past themselves. This can happen, for example, when they are expected to do their own research for practical assignments or their subject

cluster projects. The author's history and intent, as well as the context of the source, must be carefully considered using different sources (Wineburg, 2001).

Questions associated with this approach are: What does this information mean? What is missing, or deliberately omitted? Who is supplying this information and with which intent? For which situation, group of people or belief is this information representative? Does this information match what other sources have to say on the matter? Which interpretation appears to be more valid, and what evidence supports this?

(E) Significance

This perspective covers the importance of a history for us in the present or for people in the past. How does one determine which history is of importance and which is not? Considering the significance of a history is hallmarked by the flexible relation to the past, the criteria change over time. What was of great importance for one group in one era, may be cast aside by another group in a different time.

Questions associated with this approach are: Why do we want to know this? Which story of the past is important and wants society to be remembered? How do we decide what is important to know about the past? Significance can be a deeply personal thing for an individual, but also socially constructed by (larger groups in) society.

(F) (Moral) Judgement

It is important to ask how the past can help us understand and shape the present. Why do we learn about this past? When doing so, it is difficult not to judge inhumane or praiseworthy behaviour of our predecessors using present-day norms and values. A moral question is for example of descendants of slavery should receive any form of reparations. Because norms and values are also subject to change over time and to biases, it can be helpful to consider the implicit and explicit judgements of historians on a specific past.

Questions associated with this approach are: What do I think of what people in the past thought and did? What do I consider right and wrong? In which ways do these values differ

from those in the past? To what extent are we responsible for the acts of people in the past, and why?

(G) Identity

History can help pupils to discover their ideals and values and develop as persons with unique positions in society. In doing so, knowledge about the past should be explicitly linked to the lives of pupils and the society of which they are part (Van Straaten et al, 2016). A meaningful historical narrative can be used in the context of personal questions about one's own identity and of understanding societal developments. For the school subject history it is important to determine whose perspectives a historical narrative represents? Who is telling the story, who is its subject, and who is meant to receive it? Teachers are faced with different pupil backgrounds, which can have a shared, but also a separate and unique relation to the past (Grever & Ribbens, 2007). Should you miss this point, chances are that only one viewpoint is highlighted, or the past is discussed in an 'us-them' terminology. As such, this approach is specifically and explicitly placed in the web to ensure that who is in the classroom and who is the subject of the story can be taken into account when discussing a topic.

Questions associated with this approach are: What is the influence of the historical context on people's lives, thinking, and acting? How has history determined my life, and the world around me?

(H) Fascination

Finally, our interest in the past can be caused by our fascination for objects, customs, or events. When studying history, it can be helpful to ask yourself why something is pretty, appealing, or offensive. Objects, people and events from the past can affect lives and thoughts in the present. Therefore, the past not only matters because of it symbolic function, but also because of people's personal relations with the past. In this context historians sometimes talk about a 'historical sensation', which makes it seem as if one is in direct contact with the past (Huizinga, 1950). Emotions such as admiration, disgust or outrage can also be connected to how the past is experienced and why it piques our interest.

Questions associated with this approach are: What do I find fascinating in this history? How does this object/story/event affect me? Why do I find it appealing or offensive?

Example: a workshop.

During a workshop in the conference, Italian and Dutch participants were challenged to use the web in order to discuss multiple perspectives on a concrete and sensitive heritage object. The workshop started with a discussion about an unwrapped mummy boy. This example was deliberately chosen as it is an example of a sensitive topic, but not as sensitive that it would trigger fierce moral responses. Therefore it could function as an adequate starting point for introducing the web of perspectives as evoking strong emotion can hinder an discussion about multiperspectivity (Wansink et al, 2017). This Egyptian mummy boy is part of the collection of the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities since 1828 and displayed in the permanent exhibition, being one of the public's favourites. In 2016, the museum decided not to display the mummy any longer, after a public debate on the question if it was still appropriate to exhibit the remains of a dead child. The slightly prevailing view was that you should not look at a dead child nowadays. When discussing this case-study during the workshop (Should the mummy boy be exhibited again?) many perspectives evolved. Some participants agreed, stressing the historical importance and sensation of the 'object' (the term is sensitive in itself), while others empathized with the boy or his parents, arguing that they would not have wanted their son's dead body to lie on display in a museum.

In cases like these, the discussion often generates several questions, concerning the role of museums in (not) displaying objects, the original intentions people had with this object (ancient Egyptians probably did not want mummies to end up in museums), the effect such objects might have on different visitors, the different reasons as to why an object (after years of display) is 'suddenly' too sensitive to be shown. But in the end all these questions lead to one fundamental question: how do we handle human remains? The web can help to make explicit these questions and to highlight different perspectives in time and thinking, but also make aware of the perspectives that were not mentioned yet, for example the use of sources and evidence.

After discussing the mummy focusing on the time layer 'in the present,' the workshop leaders showed how this case about the mummy could be used to address the other time layers. For example, a teacher could (depending on the year/level of the pupils) choose to address the context in which the mummy boy lived/died (i.e. temporal layer in the past). The questions in the left column of the web of perspectives can guide the learning process and the

selection of source and background material. They could cover the process of mummification, but also the social, economic, and political context which enabled these kinds of practices. Another option is to investigate the way in which human remains have been handled throughout time (time layer between past and present) and provide a selection of sources about mummification, the renewed interest in ancient Egypt at the start of the 19th century (Napoleon, the formation of nations, nationalism and the history of modern museums) and the more recent way of handling the mummy. This approach allows pupils to think about continuity and change in dealing with human remains, and use the defining characteristics and associated concepts (another compulsory part of the Dutch history curriculum) as an organising principle (urban society, enlightened thinking in the 18th century, formation of nations, nationalism). After the discussion about the mummy and getting familiar with the web of perspectives the workshop continued with more political sensitive topics in Dutch history.

A trip to Foro Italico. An unexpected opportunity?

After the workshop all conference participants went on a trip to *Foro Italico* in Rome. The authors of this article do not claim to be specialists in the field of fascist history and heritage. But, as we did in the workshop during the conference, we want to invite the readers of Novecento to reflect on the usefulness and practicability of the model presented in this article in discussing a controversial and sensitive heritage site from a historical period of which other examples can be found all over Italy. Among many other examples of fascist architecture and art in the area, the mosaics designed by Angelo Canevari, Achille Capizzano, Giulio Rosso and Gino Severini made around 1934-1938 caught our attention (see figure 1). An unprepared foreign passer-by like ourselves is easily drawn into an unnuanced and indignant judgement about the fact that these mosaics referring to fascist history are still there (and they were even restored in 2007) and, at the same time, might be fascinated by the beauty of them, or by the skills of those who made them (time layer in the present). After this first affective and emotional response, the use of the web challenges to take a more a detailed and systematic look at the object and can raise questions about what is depicted. In the case of the image represented in the picture below (Figure 1), the mosaic probably refers to the violence and intimidation of the fascist *squadrismo* following the *biennio rosso* (1919-1920) (time layer in the past). The analogy of St George and the Dragon is interesting, referring to a different, less obvious cultural framework, and triggers thinking trough time (time layer between past and present). This object could be an introduction to further questions about fascism and its

cultural propaganda, and its use of not only classical motives and techniques (continuity & change) but also other historical references. It also triggers historical perspective taking to understand the historical context of the time this was made. At the same time, it raises all kinds of questions about Rome and Italy since the fall of the fascist regime and the legacy of its heritage. The key question to involve pupils and trigger historical reasoning could therefore be if we should erase a specific narrative or monument of the past, because it is uncomfortable or sensitive.

Can the web of perspectives be used in this way with our pupils?. Pupils can be put to work thinking about the key question of erasing/not erasing the past. In order to construct their own historical argumentation regarding this issue pupils could; (1) study sources that reconstruct the ideas of the makers and witnesses of the mosaics and determine how representative these ideas were; (2) describe to what extent these ideas changed over time and (3) finally determine the historical and personal (contemporary) significance of these mosaics and 4) formulate a more substantiated view on this issue. We believe this can be a fruitful task for pupils to take the 'sting' out of the emotional responses and come to a more inclusive and historical approach of the issue. Therefore, we warmly invite our readers to share their views with us.

Figure 1: detail of mosaic at the Foro italico

Conclusion

Teaching about controversial topics can trigger strong emotions and conflicting perspectives. Research shows that many teachers report that they think they are capable of dealing with controversial topics, but that there are also teachers who struggle to do so. We have found that

teachers can feel unsure and find it difficult to organize their lessons from the point of view of didactics. In order to help these teachers we have developed a tool (i.e. a web of reasoning) based on theoretical as well as practical insights to enhance the historical thinking of pupils when learning about controversial topics. Ongoing research and our practical experiences with teachers and teacher students who investigate the practicality of the tool are hopeful. We experience that the directions as presented in the tool indeed help teachers to make deliberate choices about the design of their lessons. At the same time, it takes time and training for teachers to understand how the tool can be applied. We have noticed that teachers can be overwhelmed with the different directions they can take in their lesson design when using the tool. Therefore in the Netherlands we provide teacher training courses in how to apply the tool. We stimulate teachers to first choose one thought direction and to keep it simple. When looking at the three temporal layers we see that teachers mainly focus on the historical object situated in its own time, for example, the mummy in Ancient Egypt. Alternatively, they focus on the present, for example by asking pupils their opinions about mummies. In line with previous research teachers find it difficult to design lessons focusing on the temporal circle between past and present, for example how mummies where perceived and used in the 19th century. One reason for the absence of this time layer is that an extra historical context comes into play, namely the 19th century. However, especially when teaching sensitive history we think the time layer between past and present is important. As by looking at the time in between the past and the present, perspectives from the historiographic point of view can get 'the sting' out of dichotomies that often dominate discussions (past vs. present; sensitive vs. not sensitive). Furthermore, in relation to sensitive history we propose that teachers should especially reflect on the use and impact of the thought directions, moral judgements, significance, identity and evidence. First, because these thought directions will likely trigger the most intense discussions between pupils in their classrooms. Second, because teachers own relation with the historical topic also can influence their teaching strategy and lesson design. We think that using the tool deliberately helps teachers to reflect on their moral and epistemological relation with the sensitive topic. Finally, we propose that when teachers start using the tool for designing a lesson about a controversial topic they should first focus on a topic that can be perceived as 'cold' history, meaning those histories that do not trigger strong emotional responses by pupils or teachers; the mummy is a good example here. Cold topics can be used to learn pupils to think historically in a safe environment. Later these skills can be applied in a more challenging learning environment when discussing a more sensitive topic

(Wansink et al, 2019). We hope that the web of perspectives will challenge teachers and help them making decisions for their lessons. As such it can hopefully contribute to the professional and didactic development of history teachers. Reactions to this article about the practicability of the tool, in the Italian case mentioned here as well as in others, will be highly appreciated.

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