

A Brief Discussion on Cultivating Thinking Skills in High School History Education

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Abstract: Historical thinking refers to a cognitive activity or process that integrates general thinking with specific thinking activities unique to the history discipline. Historical thinking skills, therefore, represent the ability to solve problems demonstrated within the context of historical thinking activities. Cultivating high school students' historical thinking skills requires teachers to familiarize themselves with the fundamental characteristics of students' historical thinking, guide them in deeply understanding the basic concepts and principles of historical thinking, refine their cognitive structures, innovate teaching, learning, and evaluation methods, and stimulate intrinsic motivation for learning. This is not only a vital field of theoretical research in high school history education but also a key aspect of the reform and development of history teaching in secondary schools.

Keywords: High school History; Thinking skills; Cultivation

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1. The concept of thinking skills in history education

Thinking is a subject of multidisciplinary research, and its complexity has led to varying definitions even within a single discipline. Most domestic educators and psychologists provide similar interpretations of thinking, generally referring to it as the brain's abstract and indirect reflection of the essential attributes and laws of objective phenomena^[1]. Put simply, whenever people encounter problems in work, study, or life, they always "think about it." This "thinking" is what constitutes thinking itself. Both thinking and perception belong to cognitive activities; the difference lies in the fact that thinking represents a higher stage of cognition.

Thinking skills refer to the innate ability to think, particularly the capacity for logical thinking. Historical thinking skills are based on historical knowledge and involve the ability to analyze and solve historical and contemporary issues, as well as foresee future developments. These skills manifest as problem-solving abilities within historical thinking activities. During historical cognitive activities, forming and developing a scientific historical perspective—specifically, dialectical materialism and historical materialism—and applying it to examine and solve social and historical problems is key to developing historical thinking skills.

2. Reasons behind the challenges in cultivating thinking skills in high school history education

2.1. Student perspective

2.1.1. Weak foundation in basic historical knowledge among high school students

During the three years of high school, many students achieve significant improvements in their history grades through hard work. However, a puzzling phenomenon is observed: some students who excelled in liberal arts thinking and achieved outstanding history grades in their second year of high school show a decline in performance during their final year. The reasons for this include the following:

Firstly, “Knowledge is essential for any kind of thinking. Without knowledge, one cannot think; conversely, without thinking, knowledge is hollow and lifeless.” Secondly, in answering historical questions, students often quantify problems and approach them with precision. This raises the question of whether students are mechanically applying the thinking patterns they use in science subjects to history and whether their intense focus on mathematics in high school, spending hours immersed in solving math problems, has led them to neglect liberal arts subjects. Different subjects require distinct cognitive approaches due to the unique nature of their content. However, for a long time, while people have differentiated humans, society, and history from natural sciences in terms of research objects, they have not fully moved away from adopting natural science methodologies. This has resulted in an over-reliance on scientific thinking to derive, encompass, and even replace historical thinking.

2.1.2. Interference from cognitive set

The concept of “cognitive set” was introduced by German psychologists Müller and Schumann in 1889, with cognitive set being one of its components. A cognitive set refers to a pre-prepared mental state that individuals adopt when engaging in an activity, essentially a fixed mindset that restricts and confines their thinking within an established framework, preventing creative expression ^[2]. Cognitive sets have their positive aspects. For instance, under unchanged conditions, they enable individuals to utilize existing knowledge and experience to solve problems quickly. However, when conditions change, this thinking pattern mainly reveals its negative side. Taking students’ learning as an example: after accumulating extensive experience over time, students develop habitual ways of understanding things. When faced with new problems, they blindly rely on past experiences and fail to consider the differences between new and old problems. On the surface, students encountering such issues often exhibit “overly quick reactions.” Sometimes, cognitive sets manifest in students’ blind faith in textbooks or authoritative statements. They focus solely on memorizing these sources and hesitate to express their own opinions.

2.2. Teacher perspective: Shortcomings of the current classroom teaching structure

The utilitarian mindset of the surrounding environment, leaders, parents, and students: Everyone hopes to allocate more study time to core subjects like Chinese, mathematics, and English, while expecting history to be learned entirely within the classroom without requiring additional time after class, all in pursuit of “efficiency.” In such an environment, can quality education in the subject of history still be effectively carried out? Is there sufficient time to deeply reflect on historical issues?

Learners’ own inertia and lack of interest: Students are accustomed to the teaching model of “taking notes in class, memorizing notes for exams, and forgetting everything after the test.”

The absence of teachers’ sense of agency: Deficiencies in educational responsibility, research spirit, or subject-related skills are apparent. Firstly, some teachers lack an adequate understanding of the importance of

cultivating critical thinking. Secondly, the application of teaching methods in history often has issues. Poorly designed questions fail to stimulate students' thinking, and teachers should allow sufficient time for students to think after posing questions. Finally, the design of teaching processes often does not adequately consider students' needs.

2.3. Textbook perspective

2.3.1. Incomplete content in textbooks

Some content in textbooks is classified as elective, meaning that some students will not study it, leaving gaps in their understanding of this period of history and affecting their grasp of the overall knowledge structure. Due to high school students' lack of emphasis on middle school history, they often lack a solid factual foundation. High school's specialized history courses, which focus more on historical understanding, become difficult to grasp. If students do not even clearly understand the "what," how can they comprehend the "how"?

2.3.2. History conclusions in textbooks are numerous and "authoritative"

Exams, which are an important method of educational evaluation, mostly use the conclusions and viewpoints in textbooks as scoring criteria, except for a few open-ended questions. To score high marks, students only need to memorize the textbook.

2.3.3. Lack of primary historical sources

Textbooks often replace the presentation of primary historical sources with logical descriptions of historical facts. As a result, students lack opportunities to understand history in its original form, which is highly unfavorable for creating problem-based learning scenarios and understanding history.

2.3.4. Extensive content and high memorization requirements in textbooks

To cope with immediate challenges, learners tend to "take shortcuts," treating study materials that have comprehension and application value solely as memorization tasks. This further contributes to the inertia of critical thinking.

2.4. Inadequacies in the teaching evaluation system

2.4.1. Textbook-centric issues

For a long time, middle school history teachers have been accustomed to teaching centered around textbooks. Not only do they rely on textbooks for basic historical facts, but historical evaluations also depend heavily on textbooks, resulting in a "formulaic" approach to learning history. The reason is simple: it is widely believed that middle school history teaching is exam-oriented, and past history exams heavily relied on textbooks. This "utilitarian" approach to history teaching focuses only on key knowledge points, neglecting the development of students' individuality and psychology. As a result, it becomes disconnected from students' needs, leading to a lack of initiative in their learning^[3].

2.4.2. Over-reliance on exam scores

Modern teaching evaluation emphasizes process-based assessment, focusing on how each student learns, their thinking abilities, learning methods, and other aspects that require constant attention from teachers. However, in practice, non-homeroom history teachers rarely have opportunities to inquire into these areas. As a result, students' academic evaluations mainly rely on a few exam scores.

2.4.3. Issues with the environment and methods of teaching practice

In both science and humanities subjects, objective questions are heavily used in exams, presenting students with four listed answer options. However, this format greatly differs from real-life problems. Real-world issues are often open-ended and require independent exploration, with few ready-made answers. While objective questions have various advantages, they have significant shortcomings in terms of training critical thinking. They can fixate students' thinking patterns, foster inertia when faced with multifaceted and multi-layered choices, and weaken their ability to make comprehensive judgments and decisions. Individuals with such deficiencies tend to approach problems with a "one-track mind," lacking divergent thinking.

3. Exploration of implementation strategies for cultivating thinking skills in high school history education

"If a person masters the fundamental theories of his discipline and learns to think and work independently, he is bound to find his own path and will adapt better to progress and change compared to those whose training primarily focuses on acquiring detailed knowledge." The so-called "general ability for independent thinking and independent judgment" refers to thinking skills. Teachers' understanding of thinking and their level of thinking skills directly determine the thinking level of their students. To cultivate students with independent thinking and judgment skills, teachers themselves must first possess such skills.

Students' historical thinking skills can be developed through training, which is achieved during the process of understanding and mastering historical knowledge. The primary platform for developing historical thinking skills is the specific teaching of history in the classroom.

3.1. Cultivating historical thinking skills based on the presentation of historical thinking

As an ideological subject, history reflects that people from different eras may have varied views on the same event or figure. These perspectives can generally be divided into three temporal modes: (1) Synchronic thinking: The perspective of contemporaries, reflecting views of the same era; (2) Historical thinking: The perspective of later generations, reflecting views of the past; (3) Present thinking: The perspective of the modern era, reflecting contemporary views. By understanding these characteristics, teachers can integrate such thinking modes into daily teaching, enabling students to approach historical events more objectively and comprehensively, thereby enhancing the rigor of their thinking.

3.2. Cultivating students' thinking skills through historical sources

Integrating historical sources into teaching and assessments, and emphasizing their use as evidence to explore historical issues, has become a hallmark of high school history education in many developed countries. In classroom teaching, the selection of representative historical sources to enrich textbooks, naturally and organically interwoven throughout the teaching process, can better assist students in understanding the content. This approach achieves a combination of history and theory, where arguments are derived from historical evidence. It strengthens the connections between historical events, allowing students to comprehensively understand a particular historical event or figure, thereby broadening their thinking horizons.

3.3. Strengthening theoretical learning and exploring innovative teaching models conducive to thinking development

Drawing inspiration from teaching methods like the four-step teaching approach adopted by other schools ^[4],

the practical application of these new teaching formats significantly enhances students' thinking abilities and achieves notable results. The four-step teaching approach divides a lesson into four stages: setting the scene, providing inspiration, reinforcing the foundation, and conducting in-depth analysis.

The first step, "setting the scene," involves introducing new lessons by creating scenarios. This involves teachers purposefully introducing or designing vivid and concrete scenes imbued with emotional elements and imagery to elicit students' experiential responses. Such scenarios help students understand the material while fostering their cognitive development. As secondary school history textbooks often feel disconnected from students' daily lives, and specialized modules further dilute the subject's appeal, traditional teaching methods struggle to engage students. By using scenario-based lesson introductions, teachers can effectively spark students' enthusiasm for learning at the start of the lesson, thereby improving teaching outcomes.

After introducing the lesson, the next two steps focus on reinforcing the foundation and conducting in-depth analysis. Based on a thorough review of the senior high school history curriculum standards and academic proficiency exam guidelines, history teaching at this stage mainly addresses two levels of requirements:

- (1) Knowledge level requirements: These focus on memorization and are addressed through the second step—reinforcing the foundation. As this content primarily involves rote learning with low cognitive demands, it is suitable for self-directed learning. Teachers play a guiding role by setting learning objectives, creating tables, integrating textbooks, and designing targeted questions to facilitate self-study. They also monitor whether students achieve the expected outcomes of their self-study.
- (2) Cognitive level requirements: These focus on understanding. This involves delving deeper into historical phenomena and events that students have already grasped, analyzing their causes, impacts, and limitations^[5]. As this level requires higher-order thinking skills, fully relying on students' independent inquiry may hinder the completion of teaching objectives.

In this context, teachers should take a more active role in in-depth analysis by carefully selecting materials, posing layered questions, and guiding students' thought processes toward higher levels of understanding. This approach enhances students' comprehension of historical events and phenomena. Once students reach a high level of thinking through in-depth analysis, the fourth step involves guiding them to reflect on the lessons and insights gained from historical study, thus realizing the practical relevance of history.

3.4. Emphasizing the integration of thinking skills training across disciplines

Historical thinking involves a holistic approach to examining societal and historical issues from multiple angles and dimensions^[6]. Developing this ability requires a long-term process. Given students' limited time for history amidst their packed schedules, integrating thinking skills from other disciplines into history teaching minimizes unnecessary interference while promoting the horizontal transfer of thinking abilities. For example:

- (1) Mathematics: Incorporating logical concepts such as sufficient and necessary conditions when analyzing the causes of historical events.
- (2) Philosophy and political science: Applying dialectical perspectives, such as viewing historical figures' merits and faults comprehensively.
- (3) Geography: Using geographical knowledge to analyze the characteristics of historical phenomena and their interrelationships.

While analyzing the major social transformations during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, concepts like productive forces determining production relations, economic foundations determining superstructures, and social existence determining social consciousness are introduced. When discussing the

economic crises in capitalist societies, the fundamental and principal contradictions of capitalism are examined. In studying ancient Greek democracy, the significant influence of Greece's unique geographical position and environment on its democratic politics is emphasized.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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