

DISCUSSING THE EVIDENCE¹

– small group work in the History class

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INTRODUCTION

Although an analysis of pupils' responses in a small-group situation in history classes was the main purpose of the investigation described in this article, an incidental second purpose emerged: how did pupils respond to the discovery (inquiry) teaching strategy? It is very common for tasks given to pupils in small group work to depend on the pupils' own discoveries, guided, directly or indirectly, by the teacher. There has been little research done in either field to date in South African education, as was found during a recent study of the teaching of junior secondary pupils by these methods. The potential of either method can, however, not be denied, as anyone familiar with the success of the American Amherst Project (1970) or the greater success of the Schools Council History 13 – 16 project (Shemilt, 1980) will agree.

The writers are not the only persons currently interested in the use of group discussions in the history class. Ashby and Lee (1987) have recently begun (but not yet completed) an investigation into five levels of growing sophistication in pupils' historical understanding through appropriate group discussions.

The practical study was based partly on the theories of Kolb, whose experiential learning cycle depends on three assumptions:

- (1) We learn best when we are personally involved in the learning experience.
- (2) Knowledge of any kind has more significance when we learn it through our own initiative, insight and discovery.
- (3) Learning is best when we are committed to aims that we have been involved in setting, when our participation with others is valued and when there is a supportive framework in which to learn.

(Quoted in Jaques, D., 1984, P. xii)

Kolb claims that learning should begin with a concrete experience, which leads to further observation and reflection.

This aids concept formation and the development of further theories. This active experimentation provides the stimulus for new experiences.

Other writers stress the affective benefits of groupwork. Kaye and Rogers (1989, p. 76) have reported how the peer-group becomes a natural form of social organization for the secondary schoolchild.

Group work, say Kerry and Sands (1982, p. 5), helps pupils to learn to work co-operatively, allows children to learn from each other and removes the stigma of failure from slow pupils. Jaques (1984, p. 1), stresses the sense of identity and social belonging which the learner can gain from a well-run group.

Another important set of arguments, specifically about history teaching, concerns what is termed the "skills" approach. One of the earliest explanations was that of Coltham and Fines' (1971) who attempted to list objectives for the study of history. These have subsequently been refined and particularized, especially in the Department of Education and Science's paper (1985) and in Sylvester's (1980) presentation, which referred specifically to the objectives of the History 13 – 16 Project. The D.E.S. list, however, did not confine the skills to a particular project or syllabus, but suggested that these skills could be developed in any scheme of work. It is claimed (D.E.S., 1985, pp. 18 – 19) that by the age of fourteen, pupils ought to be able to use an increasing number of terms derived directly from the topics studied. They ought also to be able to use terms commonly found in all *historical explanations* (e.g. motive, cause, change, reform, progress, economic, political, social). *Empathetic understanding* ought also to be developed to the extent that the pupil can see two sides of

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an argument, even if he does not agree with one of them. He ought at the age of fourteen to be able to *compare* and *contrast* two accounts of the same event and recognise that evidence may not always be impartial. He should be able to distinguish between *fact* and *opinion*, and begin to interpret simple *statistical sources*.

In addition to this range of skills, Sylvester suggested that the fourteen-year-old pupils ought to have a knowledge of the chronological sequence of at least his own country's history. Most important, for this study, he ought to be aware of a variety of historical *evidence*. He ought to be able to distinguish between primary and secondary sources. He ought to be able to interpret secondary sources such as *maps*, *charts* or *graphs*. He ought to be able to *summarize evidence* and draw relevant conclusions.

THE INVESTIGATION

This article does not claim that group work solves all classroom problems, nor that it supplants all other learning situations. Nevertheless the encouraging results from the experiment suggest that greater use could profitably be made of this technique in South African schools.

There were three main areas which, it was hoped, would emerge from this study.

1. The primary aim of the study was to show how pupils could derive benefit from the discussion of historical topics in small groups.
2. Secondly, the study aimed to show how, through informal discussion, pupils could gain insight into the meaning of historical concepts.
3. Thirdly, the study examined how pupils of high, medium and low intelligence, and of mixed-ability groups interacted, to assess which kind of group formation was likely to give greatest benefit to the pupils.

The study consisted of three stages: the teaching stage, the discussion stage and the analysis stage. This historical topic chosen for the study was *The Plains Indians of the American West*, and was based to a large extent on a section from the *Schools Council History Project 13 – 16 – The American West*, (1977). This was a subject which none of the pupils had studied at school before, thereby reducing the possibility of any of the participants being influenced by previous teaching.

Each pupil received a hand-out of selected source-material, consisting of documentary evidence, maps and pictures, some of it edited from the original sources, to ensure that the boys could work on the evidence without direct help from the teacher, apart from definitions of difficult words or phrases.

As an example of this editing process, a single document in its original form can be contrasted with the shortened version. It is claimed that the simplification did not seriously distort the text.

Major Long's description of the Great Plains, 1819 – 20.

Original source

In regard to this extensive section of the country, I do not hesitate in giving the opinion, that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence. Although tracts of fertile land considerably extensive are occasionally to be met with, yet the scarcity of wood and water, will prove an insuperable obstacle in the way of settling the country.

Edited version

This extensive section of country is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence (life support). The scarcity of wood and water will prove an insuperable obstacle in the way of settling the country.

A text built up entirely from documents is unusual in South

African history teaching. The aim was to teach this section of work by using the enquiry method. In many cases the pupils would have to decide on the facts for themselves from the evidence at their disposal. In this way it was hoped to stimulate empathy for both protagonists in the story – the white Americans and the Plains Indians. These sources would provide essential background material for the discussion sessions which were to follow the lessons. The link with the skills approach, already described, should be clear.

For the small group discussions, special stimulus material of different kinds was prepared: a pair of conflicting documents; a pair of maps of the "before . . . after" type; and sets of statistics. These were distributed among the groups, each one having one type of material. All the groups, however, received the same set of three questions:

1. What was the effect of the destruction of the buffalo and the Indians' hunting grounds on the lives of the Plains Indians?
2. We have seen that some white men claimed that they had a right to Indian territory on the grounds that they were more civilized and could use the land more profitably. How would you support or criticize this claim?
3. List three or four similarities between parts of South African history and this period of American history.

The standard seven pupils (87 in total) from a medium-sized English-medium boys' high school were selected for the purposes of the study. History is a compulsory subject in standard seven and for that reason there is a wide range of ability among the pupils. They had had very little experience in working in small groups.

The question of group composition (homogeneous or heterogeneous) became one of the main areas of study. Twelve groups of three members each were chosen from the total sample of pupils. Three groups were composed of pupils of above I.Q. 120; three of pupils with I.Q.'s between 100 and 119; and three of pupils with I.Q.'s below 100. The last three groups were made up of pupils of mixed ability. Although three pupils form a comparatively small number for conventional classroom groups, this number gave greater opportunity for each member to contribute to the discussion and so to assess the nature of different contributions.

Although, as far as was possible, a relaxed atmosphere was maintained during the recording sessions, the pupils almost without exception took the exercise seriously. Each of the group discussions, which lasted about 20 minutes, were recorded onto audio-tape and subsequently transcribed for detailed analysis. The role of the researcher was that of observer and he did not participate in the discussions. Through analysis of the transcriptions it was hoped to find evidence to show whether pupils benefitted academically from discussion in small groups; whether they had come to a deeper understanding of some historical concepts; whether certain stimuli were more conducive to fruitful discussion than others; and whether the mixed ability groups provided weaker pupils with a satisfactory forum in which to learn.

SOME RESULTS

In the discussion groups, pupils were forced to use several of the skills in the Department of Education and Science's list (1985). They had to *recall* points made during the introductory lessons and *relate* these to the documentary handout and to the stimulus material provided for the discussions. They had to *apply* this specific knowledge to the life-styles of the Indians and the whites, and *compare* and *contrast* conflicting accounts, and so had to *distinguish* between *fact* and *opinion*. In many cases, they had to *interpret* statistical information. They had opportunities to show *empathy*.

In order to assess the quality of the discussions, a number of criteria were established as appropriate answers for each question. This enabled a quantitative analysis to be made of the transcripts. For the first question, on the effects of the destruction of the buffalo, six main ideas were listed. Table 1 shows the number of groups, out of the 12 participating

in the research, who mentioned the idea.

TABLE 1
Quantitative analysis of responses to Question One.

Criteria for Question One	Number of groups raising the point in discussion (out of 12)
1. Buffalo almost extinct	11
2. Indian sources of life destroyed	10
3. Indian population killed off	10
4. Change from nomad to settler and hunter to agriculturalist	7
6. Dependence on white man's support.	6

It is noteworthy that nearly all the groups, no matter what their composition, raised what can be claimed to be the three most important points. Half of the groups were able to raise all six significant issues. It is noteworthy that when a criterion point was omitted by a group, omission was by no means confined to the lower ability pupils.

Examples of actual responses to question one

1. W: Ja and also the reason why it (the killing) was stopped wasn't for that (the number killed), it was because they were running out of buffaloes to kill, more likely.
2. J: But I see your point here, because most Indians didn't grow crops or have cattle, or sheep or any livestock. They just followed the buffalo around. . .
3. R: O.K. Look here, um, ah, look at the big difference between the Indians over there – all the territory (referring to the 1840 map) – and the Indians in 1900.

All the groups dealt with this question fairly well, except that those groups with the documentary stimulus generally made fewer points than did the groups with the map stimulus or those with the statistical stimulus.

Since it was only in this question that this deficiency occurred, a possible explanation is that these groups soon lost interest in this question and gave their attention to the second question, which was more taxing. A high I.Q. group, for example, made only three points on this issue, which nevertheless adequately summed up the problem, before moving on to question two. These points were that the Indian sources of life had been removed, that buffalo had been reduced to virtual extinction, and that the Indian population would have decreased. One member of this group began the discussion with the words "Well, it would seem pretty obvious that they couldn't obtain enough. . ." Over the whole exercise, however, this group made more points than did any other group.

It has already been suggested that the second question (on the justification for white men taking the Indian's land) was more difficult. Four key ideas were set up as the criteria for this discussion, and they are shown in Table 2, together with the number of groups that raised each point.

TABLE 2
Quantitative analysis of responses to Question Two.

Criteria for Question Two	Number of groups raising the point in discussion (out of 12)
1. Meaning of "profitable use of land"	11
2. Conflict between tribal and white values, e.g. of land	10
3. Indians there a long time/they should not be moved	10
4. Were the whites really civilized?	7

These results show that most groups were unwilling to apply absolute or one-sided interpretations. More than half the groups questioned the link between civilization and

technology.

Examples of actual responses to question two

1. P: Well, you can't. . . oh, suming up is that the white man is a bit pushy, I think.
D: Ja, greedy.
P: And wanting to take over.
V: Yeah, have everything for themselves.
D: And expand his profits.

This interesting interaction is noteworthy for the fact that all three members were drawn into the discussion, each adding something to what the others had initially suggested, so that a generalisation from "P" becomes a more clearly defined statement in the end.

2. I: Well, the Indians had been living there for thousands, yes thousands of years before the white man came along.
3. V: They thought they were so civilized, the Yanks, with their culture and their religion and their machinery. They thought they could . . . that just gave them the right to wipe out anybody they felt like.
4. P: Because civilized actually means, from the white man's point of view, is more advanced. Let's see, the Indians were more advanced in um, their living on the plains.
5. S: They are supposed to have the land because they can do more with it.
V: The white man didn't get more civilized – they were more modernized.

There is no doubt that question two was a difficult one for the pupils to handle (one boy called it a 'stinker' of a question). It is interesting to place a number of responses together to show how the pupils at times "worried" at a problem and were more than ready to show tentative and questioning responses. All these came from one group, and so this can be regarded as an edited version of part of one of the discussions (Tunmer, 1988).

When talking of the white Americans one pupils said:

They thought they were civilized with their culture and their religion and their machinery . . . They thought . . . (that) just gave them the right to wipe out anybody they felt like.

Another started to change his mind (to apply different criteria for the concept of civilization) when he said:

It wasn't because their skin was white, it was because they were more civilized. . .

A few moments later he qualified this by asking

Do you think they were more civilized though? I mean their wars, their misdemeanours and that . . . they just had more machinery to do it (driving the Indians off the land).

Another confirmed this and tried to make a distinction between civilization and technology:

The white man didn't get more civilized . . . they were more modernized.

Yet another pupil tried to relate civilization to the culture and in its turn to the material conditions of life:

But the Indians were civilized; they were civilized to what they needed. They weren't undercivilized, they were civilized to their own need.

Others tried to make a comment on the absence of civilization which was revealed when a technologically superior people dispossessed others of their land:

Because the land belonged to the people . . . (it) doesn't matter how civilized or uncivilized they are, they still live on the land.

One boy tried to create a new definition of civilization:

Civilization is working with other people, not working with arms and shooting things.

Because of the open-ended nature of Question Three ("List three or four similarities between parts of South African history and this period of American history") it was more difficult to set exact criteria for acceptable answers. Instead, a simple

content analysis was made from the transcripts. Table 3 shows the four most frequently occurring points, each of which was an acceptable response.

TABLE 3
Quantitative analysis of responses to Question Three.

Valid concepts or ideas from Question Three	Number of groups raising the point in discussion (out of 12)
1. White (USA) western; (SA) eastern "trek": both led to confrontation	9
2. Indian and Black populations removed to reservations	7
3. Different attitudes to land by whites and natives	5
4. Inter-tribal wars between Zulus and American Indians	5

Examples of actual responses to question three

- M: Trekking from one side to the other.
W: Ja, the Great Trek and also, um, the clash between the original . . . natives and the Voortrekkers.
- P: We drove them out and gave them certain places where they could live in, and it was the same with the people in America.
- I: . . . the Indians said the land was . . . didn't belong to them . . . they couldn't own the land. . . The black people didn't think (the white man) was keeping it for himself; he was just using it, like borrowing the land.
- M: And also the Zulus, the main tribe, they used to fight against these other tribes.

It has been explained that in the research, group composition was varied on the basis of intelligence test performance. Table 4 shows the average number of appropriate responses to all three questions in relation to the types of group composition.

TABLE 4
Average number of acceptable responses by type of group.

Group type	Average number of points raised
High I.Q.	17
Medium I.Q.	13.3
Low I.Q.	12.3
Mixed I.Q.	14

It is interesting to note that the homogeneous groups perform, as might be expected, according to ability. The mixed ability groups, however, performed next best, on average, to the High I.Q. groups. It is also important to note the relatively high scores of pupils whose I.Q. scores suggested that they were of average or below-average ability. It is clear that these pupils could grasp a significant number of issues pertinent to the questions and to articulate them sufficiently clearly for them to be rated as acceptable. A very positive result emerged from homogeneous groups. The results of the mixed I.Q. group, therefore, suggest that this form of grouping deserves more frequent use in classroom strategies.

It must not be claimed however, that all responses were of high quality. Errors of fact and misinterpretation occurred in all the group types.

An example of misinterpretation can be given from the discussions of the Low I.Q. group that had the maps as a stimulus source. The boys barely made any constructive use of the map information, and the plight of the Indian in his shrinking environment was virtually ignored. Instead emphasis was placed on the fact that there would be too much grazing unused after the buffalo killing:

F: The buffaloes that were killed. In all this grass – there was too much there, y'know. Like the eco-system . . . accept, hm? Cos all these animals – usually there'd be lots of them to eat all this grass and things. And now there

was more grass, they wouldn't be able to move around so much. They'd concentrate in one place, because there'd be enough grass for them. Buffaloes were killed and the Indians must have lost.

G: Ja, the Indians. . .

F: They didn't have as much food, they didn't have enough chance to get to the buffalo for clothes. They had to start making other things to make their tents with and so forth. . .

P: And, er, the Americans who supplied all the suff for making tents and that.

It must be stressed however, that errors of interpretation or fact that are made in such an exercise would normally be able to be cleared up in a report-back session, without which group discussion would be incomplete. This was not part of the research design, however.

Although a pupil's ability in history cannot be predicted with certainty on the bases of I.Q. alone, some generalizations could nevertheless be made. The level of discussion in the groups composed of pupils of high I.Q. was above that of the others in vocabulary content and conceptual grasp. In the main, the discussions of the groups of medium and low I.Q. were more stilted and did not explore matters very deeply.

On the other hand, even where the groups were hindered by a weakness in vocabulary, a number of valid points were made by the groups of lower I.Q. It would be necessary to pitch the questions at a more concrete level when dealing with pupils of lesser ability in history. The work of the Gunnings in the field of historical concepts would support this (Gunning, D. and S., 1975, p 35).

In small group work, the ideal situation is for nobody in particular to speak more than the other members, and for the discussion to take the form of an informal conversation, with one pupil taking the lead and then another. In the mixed-ability groups, the boy with the highest measured intelligence often took the lead, although no leaders were specifically appointed. It would seem that pupils who had difficulty in expressing opinions were brought into the discussion through other members speaking directly to them and expecting a meaningful response. The presence of an able pupil and his initial ideas stimulated the thinking of the others and brought out the best in them. In many cases, however, pupils with below-average measured I.Q.'s gave impressive performances.

CONCLUSION

This study of the detailed operation of twelve small groups of pupils working on a new and difficult set of historical problems showed that very satisfactory and encouraging results can emerge from this strategy. The boys responded well to all three types of stimulus material, although some pupils had difficulty in interpreting the "before and after" maps. Maps are commonly used in textbooks, and this finding suggest that teachers might give more attention to map interpretation in history lessons.

Shemilt, in his evaluation of the History Project 13–16, acknowledges that adolescent thought will always be adolescent thought, but reports the experimental pupils (who had used the discovery method almost exclusively) were found to have more "right" ideas than comparable control pupils and were generally the more lively ones (Shemilt, D., 1980, p. 14). One thing that this present study showed above all else was that given sufficient opportunity and stimulus the average standard seven pupil can produce ideas that are in some cases approaching adult maturity. With this potential available it would seem a mistake not to tap it to the full by making more use of small-group discussion on a regular basis.

Children learn by both listening and talking and should be given more opportunity to talk. Barnes states: "Tentative and inexplicit talk in small groups is the bridge from partial understanding to confident meaningful statement: (1969, p. 126). It is the writers' hope that more use will be made of this medium in the future.

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