

Agency and structure in Swedish students' historical reasoning

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In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the domain-specific ability to reason historically and how to enhance it in an educational setting (Counsell, 2011; Limon & Carretero, 1998; Monte-Sano, 2011; Van Boxtel, 2013; VanSledright, 2011; Wilcox, 2014). In order to develop her ability to reason historically the student has to make use of several different forms of disciplinary knowledge. Van Boxtel and Van Drie have formed a framework for understanding and analysing historical reasoning:

“Historical reasoning is an activity in which a person organizes information about the past in order to describe, compare, and/or explain historical phenomena. In doing this he or she asks historical questions, contextualises, makes use of substantive and meta-concepts of history, and supports proposed claims with arguments based on evidence from sources that give information about the past” (Van Boxtel & Van Drie, 2008, p.89).

The understanding and use of meta-concepts, or second order concepts, are crucial for the ability to reason historically, since they are tools with which students can analyse and describe processes of change and continuity, discuss causes and consequences, and argue about significance (Counsell, 2000; Lee, 2005). Research has investigated students' understanding and use of different concepts, including significance (Peck, 2010), cause and consequence (Montanero & Lucero, 2011), empathy (Endacott & Brooks, 2013), change (Barton, 2001), and contextualisation (Van Boxtel & Van Drie, 2012), and deepened the comprehension of these components of historical reasoning.

The concept “agent and structure” is important within the discipline of history and therefore it is desirable that students get an opportunity to develop their ability to reason in this specific way. Earlier research has investigated how students explain historical phenomena and to what extent their explanations are given in terms of agent and in terms of structure (Halldén, 1994; Jacott, Lopez-Manion & Carretero, 1998). This research shows that students tend to explain historical phenomena in terms of the individual agent, his intentions and actions rather than paying attention to structural factors. Previous research also implies that students need instruction in order to develop the ability to reason in terms of agent and structure. In this study, I focus on the concept agent and structure in an educational setting. The aim of the study is to explore this component of historical reasoning by investigating *what it means* to reason historically in this specific way, and *what it takes* for students to develop their ability to reason historically in terms of agent and structure (Lilliestam, 2013). The study is a case study: by studying a case in detail, understanding of the greater phenomenon is established (Silverman, 2005).

Theory

Phenomenography is a theory of teaching and learning. It stresses that learning is always learning of *something*. Typical questions asked in phenomenographic studies, and in studies using Variation theory, that has evolved out of Phenomenography, are: What is to be learned? What constitutes the object of learning? What does it mean to know this or to be able to do that? When you can do that, what can you do? (Marton & Booth, 1997, Marton, Runesson & Tsui, 2004).

Discernment is an important concept in this theory. A phenomenon is elucidated in contrast with what it is not, and what is to be discerned must be separated from the background. A bird sitting in a tree is hard to see, but when it flies away it stands out against the surrounding forest. Once discerned, it is also possible to see important features of the bird: the size, the

colour, and to determine what kind of bird it is. In Phenomenography learning is seen as a change in the way a person *sees* a phenomenon, and learning is thus a consequence of discernment. Different ways of seeing phenomena are characterized by which *critical aspects* of the phenomenon a person discerns and focuses on simultaneously.

To learn is to be aware of critical aspects of what is learned (Runesson, 2006, p. 397).

Learning implies a change in what aspects are discerned, how they relate to each other and to the whole.

Method and data

I conducted the study in collaboration with three history teachers and their classes in a Swedish Upper Secondary school. The students were of mixed ability. When a study is conducted under good conditions, the results cannot be explained away as being conditioned by bad circumstances (Flyvbjerg, 2006), and the design thus aimed at creating the most favourable conditions possible for the study. First, the teachers decided on the objective of the teaching: to reason historically in terms of agent and structure, and they also planned their own teaching; thus their motivation for the task would be optimal. Second, the classes were the teachers' ordinary classes, they knew each other well, and good order was maintained in the classrooms. All these factors are important in creating the desired conditions.

During the study I recorded 4 meetings with the teachers, 21 lessons, and comments on the individual lessons. I took field notes and collected textbooks and teaching aids used. In addition, I collected 65 texts, part of the examination of the course, discussing the Napoleonic era in terms of agent and structure. The students were given the following task:

- a. Explain in terms of agent and structure how it was possible for Napoleon to seize power (show the interplay between agent and structure).
- b. Explain how Napoleon as an agent changed the structure.

The teachers considered the Napoleonic era to be especially suitable for a discussion in terms of agent and structure, since the French revolution resulted in great changes in French society and with that came a new structural situation which made it possible for a person from the gentry to rise in society. In addition the Napoleonic era brought about new structural changes. The primary material of the study is these 65 texts, combined with the transcripts of the recorded lessons and the teachers' comments. The other material is used as a background.

The analyzing procedure is consistent with the theory. My categorization aims at a pedagogically meaningful understanding of *all* texts and at clarifying the ability. In order to detect the critical aspects connected with the ability, I searched for *qualitative similarities* and *differences* in how the students reasoned. The a. and b. part of the question generated texts of different nature, and had to be classified separately. I read the texts several times, and tried different ways of reading and understanding the texts, of which some were rejected, while others showed explanatory value and contributed to the final categorization.

The analysis of the texts gave the basic comprehension of the ability in an educational setting, and the analysis of the lessons deepened this understanding. Before each lesson the teacher stated what he wanted the students to learn during the lesson, and the analysis of the video recordings shows what took place during the lesson. What aspects of historical knowledge was the intention to address in the teaching and what learning was made possible? The relationship between these *intended* and *enacted* (Marton et al., 2004) objects of learning was investigated as a part of discussing what it takes to develop the ability.

Results

My first focus was the content. The students used different factors in their reasoning. The analysis shows that it is crucial to *select relevant factors*, but exactly which factor is chosen is not crucial. As long as the factors are relevant, a discussion can be valid. These factors can be *developed* by explanations, comparisons, assessments of significance, and/or causal reasoning. The second focus was the presence of both relevant structural factors and relevant factors concerning the agent. If the aim is to reason in terms of agent and structure, one must *present both kinds of factors*. Clarity was the third focus. Many students wrote texts where the readers are left to make the connections for themselves:

France was in a mess after the French revolution. Napoleon became a general at the age of 24 and he seized power.

Thus there is an important qualitative difference between those texts that have *explicit* links and those where the interaction between agent and structure is *implicit*.

Some texts gave a detailed account, demonstrating a developed understanding of this specific way of reasoning, without using the words “agent and structure”, while other texts used the terminology incorrectly and/or together with invalid factors. Thus the use of the terminology “agent and structure”, offered no explanatory value to the analysis.

The analysis of the texts resulted in a categorization of question a. with four main categories and nine subcategories (see Table 1), and a categorization of question b. with two main categories and three subcategories (see Table 2). These categories show different ways of discerning the concept agent and structure with essential qualitative differences concerning the ability to reason in terms of agent and structure. I give examples from each of the main categories. The translation aims at giving an impression of the student’s style.

Question a

Table 1. Categorization, question a.

Main category	Subcategories		
	a.	b.	c.
Reasoning showing little content knowledge	Reasoning without a historical content	Reasoning with few factors	Reasoning about the wrong historical content
Similar factors One or more factors of the same kind	Factors concerning the agent	Factors concerning the structure	
Implicit interaction The interaction between agent and structure is not described	One or some factors are developed	Several factors are developed	
Explicit interaction The interaction between agent and structure is made explicit	One or some factors are developed	Several factors are developed	

The following text is classified as *Reasoning without a historical content*, since it is neither situated in time nor in place.

An agent seizes power after a revolution. When he comes into power, people will think he's a good leader, since the one before was so worthless.

Texts making use of inaccurate historical content, are also placed in the main category *Little content knowledge*.

Texts discussing either structural factors or factors concerning the agent, manifest the characteristics of the category *Similar factors*.

In France before Napoleon came to power they had a pretty good army. The country was still in a bit of a crisis and Napoleon came to power.

In this solution, the student presents two structural factors: the army and the crisis in the country, while Napoleon emerges out of nowhere.

If a text presents both kinds of factors, it is placed in one of the *interaction* categories. The text below presents several factors and develops some of them, but the reader has to make the connections in order to understand how these factors interact. It is an example of *Implicit interaction: b*.

Many Frenchmen were tired after 5 years of power struggle and the government depended under those circumstances more and more on the military. Napoleon was a part of the gentry and was born in Corsica which became French a couple of years before he was born. In the citizenship everyone became a citizen, and he counted as French. Earlier only the nobility could be with the military, but since the lesser nobility could also be in, it opened new opportunities for Napoleon. He had a record breaking military career and it was there he began to have influence. At the same time there were no obvious agents and that opened up for new agents. Then there was equality before the law.

The following text presents several factors, develops them and shows links between at least some of the factors. It is an example from the most complex category, *Explicit interaction: b*.

Napoleon was born of Italian parents on an island which at that time belonged to France. The structure made it possible for Napoleon to become what he wanted, he was not born to be something. At a young age he entered the army where his career went well very soon. Since he was born on French soil he could join the French army despite his Italian parents. The French revolution meant that there was a class society instead of a society of estates. In a society of estates you are born to become something, for example a farmer, in contrary to a class society where you can theoretically become what you want. Agent and structure influence each other in this way that if there is not a structure that makes it possible that there are opportunities then the agent can't come a long way, but is restricted. In the same way if there is no agent that can make use of the opportunities in the structure. Had Napoleon been born 20 years earlier he could not have come to power since the French revolution had not taken place. Napoleon was very smart and risk-taking, this made him a great agent.

In this text the student manifests the discernment of several critical aspects: relevant content; factors concerning both agent and structure; presenting several factors and developing them; forming an explicit interplay, at least between some of the factors. The texts from the less complex categories manifest discernment of only one or a few critical aspects connected with the ability.

Question b

Question B made the students list changes under Napoleon, e.g. the metric system, the Napoleonic Code, the schools. The texts show differences concerning whether few or several factors are presented, and whether they are developed or not.

Table 2. Categorization, question b.

Main category	Subcategories		
	a.	b.	c.
Reasoning showing little content knowledge	Reasoning with few facts	Reasoning about the wrong historical content	
Reasoning about structural changes in the Napoleonic era	One or some factors are presented. They are not developed.	One or some factors are presented. One of the factors is developed.	Several factors are presented. Several factors are developed.

Some texts are almost empty of content and *Reason with few facts*:

He made France a better country. People started to believe that it would be good again when they got Napoleon as a leader.

The text below is placed in the category *Reasoning about structural changes in the Napoleonic era: a*. It presents some structural changes, but does not develop them.

Napoleon changed the structure by censorship, secret police and political [illegible]. By war he planned to expand France. Politically he changed things by using some ideas from the revolution but still being the only leader. Economically it became better when they won wars and technically by conscription and a big army that was rapid.

The following text is an example from the most complex category *Reasoning about structural changes in the Napoleonic era: c*. Several factors are presented and several factors are developed.

Napoleon changed a series of things that the Western countries have imitated. He changed so that the house numbers were in order with even numbers on one side and uneven on the other before they stood every which way. He made the meter the official system of measurement. He formed the Civil Code. Code Napoleon which was a book of the Law before there were a lot of others but no official. The Civil Code, it has influenced many Western countries. He introduced tax on tobacco, wagons, spirits and introduced a kind of an interest rate. He introduced mandatory schooling which everyone could afford but he also introduced colleges where the best students could enter instead of those with money as it was before.

Stories with a timeline

A large minority, one third, of the texts present one or a few factors, and continue by *describing courses of action, using a distinct timeline*. In these texts the students give accounts of Napoleon's campaign in Russia, his dethronement and deportation.

When he seized power he established censorship, secret police and prohibited labor unions. He made the army common and about every fifth person was in the army and everybody could rise in rank as long as they were brave and courageous, that increased confidence. He used fast attacks not as the others with heavy slow. Brought as little food as possible for rapid movement. But this made him vulnerable because he attacked Russia, because they just backed off and took all the provisions and destroyed everything. Finally the winter came and most of them froze or starved to death. 400 000 died and 100 000 were captured out of 600 000 men. 1812 Napoleon was sent to Elba to live there the rest of his life, but escaped and was sent to St. Helena instead. 1815 there was peace in Waterloo between Russia and France.

The author of this text shows knowledge about Napoleon and his time. However, the task was to reason in terms of agent and structure, and a story about the campaign to Russia is not a satisfactory way to do that. The texts were part of an examination, and still many students wrote texts of this kind. How can this be understood?

History is often written as a narrative, describing courses of events, using a central timeline. Reasoning in terms of agent and structure is different, discussing the importance of factors in relation to each other. This kind of reasoning is synchronic and web-like, the timeline is of secondary importance, and the different ways of organizing a text also require different choices of historical content. The *difference between a synchronic discussion in terms of agent and structure and a story with a distinct timeline* is thus shown to be a critical aspect. In order to be able to reason in terms of agent and structure, the students must have discerned the difference between these two approaches.

The ability as it appears in the texts: critical aspects

The analysis of the solutions of question A and B shows a number of critical aspects that a student has to discern, in order to reason in terms of agent and structure:

- that there is a difference between synchronic structural reasoning and presenting chains of action
- that you should select and present relevant factors that suit the intended way of reasoning
- that you should select and present structural factors
- that you should select and present factors regarding the agent
- that it is preferable to present several relevant factors
- that it is preferable to develop the factors by explanation, comparison, evaluation and/or causal reasoning
- that there should be an interaction between structural factors and factors regarding the agent in the reasoning
- that there is a difference between implicit and explicit reasoning.

The ability as it appears in the lessons

I investigated the relation between the teacher's intentions and the learning that was made possible in the lesson. It is not expected that there should be a 1-1 correspondence between the intended and the enacted object of learning. For example, the teacher can realize that the students need a repetition of something that he thought they mastered, or a question from a student can lead the lesson in a completely new direction. The teacher and the students jointly enact the lesson. However, it is of interest to see whether there is a pattern in the differences. The analysis shows that on some occasions there is a

- *correspondence* between the intended and enacted objects of learning.

In general there is some kind of divergence.

- The objects of learning can be *reduced*.
- The reasoning can be *implicit*. The teacher has the intention to elucidate the concept, but it is barely visible.
- The object of learning can *move* from the intended reasoning in terms of agent and structure towards the historical content and courses of action.
- Objects of learning related to the historical content and courses of action tend to be *retained* or *added*, while objects related to the concept agent and structure tend to be *dropped* or be *implicit*
- Reasoning in terms of agent and structure in the classroom tend to *turn into accounts of chains of action, using a distinct timeline*.

There is a pattern in the relation between the learning the teacher wants to facilitate and the learning that is made possible. The object of learning tends to move away from the meta-concept level, away from the concept agent and structure, and away from a synchronic discussion, towards the historical content and accounts of courses of action with a distinct timeline. There is also a difference between the three classes. The students in the class with the largest movement towards accounts of courses of action, tended to write accounts instead of reasoning in terms of agent and structure to a much higher degree than their peers in the other classes.

Discussion

In this study I found a number of critical aspects connected to the ability to reason historically in terms of agent and structure. The difference between a temporal description of chains of events on one hand, and reasoning about agents and structures on the other, is shown to be crucial. The students must discern what reasoning in terms of agent and structure *is*: a synchronous discussion of the relative importance of structural factors and factors concerning agents in a historical situation. Students must also discern that structures can be of different kinds, as can agents; that relevant factors must be selected; that connections between the factors should be made explicit; that these factors may be developed by further explanation, by an assessment of their relative significance, by making comparisons, or by making causal connections.

The objects of learning tend to change when enacted in the classroom: from the ability to reason historically towards the historical content, and towards temporal accounts of chains of action. The study was given favourable conditions, the teachers themselves chose the learning objectives, and yet the objects of learning moved from the meta-concept level towards the historical content and towards accounts with distinct timelines. The concept also tended to be implicit in the classroom. This indicates that the teaching of abilities is a demanding task. It also indicates the strength of the historic timeline, and that a student has to make a considerable effort in order to form historical reasoning in other ways.

A relationship is seen between the teaching in the different classes and how the students form their reasoning. My hypothesis is that the students' texts mirrored the different ways of teaching. A second hypothesis is that a temporal representation does not enhance the students' ability to reason in terms of agent and structure. On the contrary, it seems to stand in the way of the development of the ability.

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