Introduction - The politics of doing history education: Memory practices in contemporary classrooms

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ABSTRACT: Text In the introduction to this special issue on the 'politics of doing history education', we present papers contributing to an emerging paradigm of research on history education that foregrounds the *unruly practices* of doing history or enacting memory *with media technologies*, and the *indeterminate political effects* of these practices. Grounded in empirical studies, this introduction explores the potential impact of this emerging paradigm for conceptualising 'doing history (education)' after indeterminacy. Focussing on the practices of using media—in particular: (i) students' uptake, amplification, refraction, subversion and reproduction of media texts and, (ii) how non-coherence plays out in contemporary history education—provides intriguing perspectives on how knowledge and social memory circulate and shift through history education.

KEYWORDS: memory practices, doing history, indeterminacy, textbooks, educational media, politics of practices

Introduction

How do students engage with the historical accounts they meet in history education? In this special issue, this question orients not to the development of competences, historical thinking, historical reasoning or historical consciousness, but to young people's uptake, amplification and/or subversion of formalised (curricular) knowledge, that is, how they deal with mediated pasts. Much has been written over recent decades on the processes of making the past present. Under the labels of 'memory practices' or 'doing history', scholars have looked into the black box of what people do when they make the past present. An emerging body of work has examined history education from this perspective (for example, Levstik & Barton, 2015; Lévesque & Zanazanian, 2015; Loewen, 2009; Macgilchrist, Christophe & Binnenkade, 2015). We notice three areas that have received little attention thus far: educational media, student practices, and the theoretical tangle of non-coherence. This introduction offers a reading of how the papers in this special issue address these three issues. We are motived by two assumptions:

First, empirically, to increase our understanding of history education, research needs to pay more attention to material-semiotic media practices. Since historical accounts are always presented in media formats, these practices are key to how history is done and memory enacted. Second, more politically, to interrupt hegemonic discourses, we need to take into consideration the likelihood that students will often ascertain and then amplify dominant discourses, even if teachers, the designers of teaching materials or other stakeholders aim to foster a critical approach.

A core tenet of history education holds that it is, to a certain extent, determinable and coherent: curricula, textbooks and other educational media shape the content and practices of classroom teaching and learning; teachers plan courses and lessons; students attain predefined learning outcomes. If we could not aim history education at determinable outcomes, then how could we support students' learning? Yet at the same time, a key principle of history education is that history is a constructed and open-ended process. Contemporary learning theories also prioritise students' own knowledge construction, their independent ways of making sense of the past, and an open, affective engagement with multiple perspectives. In this view, the outcomes of history education are more indeterminate, unruly and non-coherent.

This paradox – between input planning and outcome indeterminacy – sits at the heart of formal education. The 'beautiful risk' of education is that we cannot determine outcomes; that teachers give so much more than input, and students do so much more than learn (see Biesta, 2013). Will students take up mainstream views? Will their independent appraisal of diverse perspectives reproduce societal discourse? Will students 'do' unusual, alternative, marginal histories and enact postcolonial, postmodern or white supremacist social memories? Will teachers open space for heterogeneous interpretations, embracing epistemic or ontological non-coherence? Moreover, at which point will they stop their students and let them rehearse dominant interpretations of history again? How do retirees reflect on the history they learnt in elementary school? Do educational materials hold together different pasts? To explore these and related questions, the papers in this special issue engage, primarily through qualitative research methods, with the politics and practices of making the past present.

Without claiming that this special issue is grounding a new paradigm, we want to make the more humble claim that the papers provide novel insights into an emerging paradigm, which foregrounds these *unruly practices* of doing history or enacting memory *with media technologies*, and the *indeterminate political effects* of these practices. These insights are empirically grounded in several international settings (Armenia, Canada, Chile, China, Czechoslovakia, Czech Republic, Germany), utilising a range of methods, and orienting to different media used in history education. In this introduction, we introduce the papers through their contribution to this nexus of unruly practices, media technologies and indeterminate political effects. Our goal is to explore the potential impact of this emerging paradigm for conceptualising 'doing history (education)' after indeterminacy. Focussing on the practices of using media—in particular: (i) *students'* uptake, amplification, refraction, subversion and reproduction of media texts and, (ii) how *non-coherence* plays out in contemporary history education—provides intriguing perspectives on how knowledge and social memory circulate and shift through history education.

The politics of practices

This special issue arose from in-depth discussions on 'doing' history education at an international symposium on the politics of memory practices.[1] The focus lay on how the past is enacted and performed in contemporary history education, with a special focus on the role of media. Central themes from these discussions are reflected in the following papers, from the

ambivalent coproduction of truths, priorities and affects, to the contested role of eyewitnesses and technological mediations of eyewitness accounts, and the complex tensions, interconnections and interruptions when classroom practices spill out into everyday life. In this 'doing' of history or memory, school texts are interwoven into the formation of subjectivities and vice versa, students' becomings are woven into school life.

Doing history, doing memory and indeed 'doing school' (Keßler, 2017) refers to a complex dynamic among, for instance, roles (teacher, student, advisor, head teacher), materialities (desks, pencil cases), temporalities (45-minute classes, breaks), locations (canteens, classrooms, school yards), sounds (bells, loudspeaker announcements), visuals (posters, signs) and, especially relevant for this special issue, media technologies (textbooks, tablets, computers, blackboards). Each school subject is enacted into being through specific material-semiotic practices, for example, chemistry through lab coats and test-tubes, history through textbooks and hand gestures towards chronological diagrams where arrows show time moving 'forwards' from left to right (Ahlrichs, 2019).

Research on practices, however, often neglects the *content*, and thus the *political*, of teaching and learning: with which issues are students engaging as they are *becoming* and *doing* and *enacting* and *performing*? The politics of memory practices (the politics of doing history) lie, we suggest, precisely at the intersection of the ways specific contents/issues are presented in media and the ways in which they are enacted in situ. The papers address this gap by bringing together a sensibility to memory practices or doing history, and to the specificity of the (contested or contestable) issues at stake. The focus lies on the politics of making the past present when we are talking about twentieth century communism in Czechoslovakia, human rights violations in Chile, genocide in Armenia, Czechoslovakia under Nazi occupation, Eurocentrism, racism and nationalism in Germany, or communist role models for moral behaviour in China. These pasts are made present though the active use of textbooks, gaming simulations, primary school songs, and other media used in schools. Their politics lies in the potential of these practices to normalise or interrupt dominant discourses, to raise awareness for alternative histories, and to hold together apparently dissonant memories.

Shifting understandings of history education

The background to our focus on the politics of practice is formed by the shifting understandings over recent decades of what history education *is* and what history education *is for*. Modern history education in schools has always already been political insofar as it was designed to shape loyal citizens. Scholars have pointed to a paradigm shift from a 'romantic' to an 'enlightened' or disciplinary approach (for example, Carretero, 2017): With the rise of nation states since the late eighteenth century, history education became an important space where the national master narrative was conveyed to young people. The corresponding medium of this 'romantic' approach to history education was the history textbook, which told the nation's history through long lists of dates and names. This approach has been challenged in many countries since the 1970s by an 'enlightened' or disciplinary approach, which encourages students to think critically, look at different perspectives and understand the complexity of history. In contrast to the 'romantic' approach, this 'enlightened' approach did not aim to convey a narrative, but to teach students how to think historically. Textbooks changed accordingly, and included many textual and visual sources with multiple perspectives that could be used as evidence when constructing or deconstructing historical narratives. This enlightened approach was framed as an emancipatory undertaking, but at the same time also shaped a certain type of citizen, including encouraging the critical capacities deemed necessary in liberal democracies of the late twentieth century (Barton & Levstik, 2004).

While critical disciplinary thinking is still the guiding principle of state-of-the-art history teaching, this approach has been questioned for several reasons. First, empirical research has shown the difficulties of teaching students historical thinking (Borries et al., 2005). Second, its 'enlightened', orderly, dispassionate character might alienate and silence students who have strong emotional ties to a particular version of the past (Chikoko et al., 2011; McCully, 2012). Third, in practice, despite attempts by textbook authors and teachers to undo the master national narrative, students have been shown to pick up and reproduce the national(ist) narratives they meet in history education (Mielke, 2019). Students' unruly practices overflow and undermine any expectations of how they should engage with history education.

Unruly media practices: Doing history education after indeterminacy

This space of unruly media practices is where this special issue joins the conversation. As noted above, a slew of books and papers have discussed the performative dimension of history in recent decades. Historians and history educators agree that history is constructed, and that historical accounts are contingent, selective narratives written from powerful positions, often with particular functions in mind. Nevertheless, it is still a challenge to teach students that even the most apparently objective history is entangled with genre conventions, power, ideology, interests, motivations, exclusions, inclusions, control, identities and politics. The implications of embracing non-coherence and the indeterminate effects of teaching or media have not yet been the focus of discussions on 'doing history' in education.

Theoretical groundwork

Recent poststructuralist, postmodern or new materialist theorising has argued against a straightforwardly individual or humanistic understanding of meaning-making. Meaning is made not by people, but by networks of human and more-than-human actants, by socio-material assemblages or material-semiotic enactments. Laying their differences aside for this overview, these theoretical positions argue that the agency of things and/or assemblages should be recognised; human agency is discursive agency, emerging from political processes of subjectivation and social positioning. One key point we take is that 'non-coherence' is not 'incoherence':

> Let's emphasise this again: we are saying that [practices] are *non*-coherent, not *in*-coherent. 'Incoherence' is a normative label, a term of opprobrium, a way of talking about failed coherences. But this is *not* what we're saying. Quite differently, we're suggesting that different 'logics' are always at hand: not that this is a bad. Or, to put it differently, we're saying that the world, even the 'modern world', is *fuzzy* and that it always has been. The challenge is to find ways of thinking and understanding this (Law et al, 2013, p. 3, emphasis in original).

Johanna Ahlrichs' dissertation abstract, *Making the past present: The politics of material-semiotic practices in the history classroom,* foregrounds the material, semiotic, symbolic and sensual dimensions of making the past present. Her two-year ethnography in a high school in Germany explored the performative micro-practices of making the past present in history classrooms, attending in particular to the political 'effectfulness' of apparently banal activities. By showing how the 'reality' of history is negotiated, she argues it is made solid, reliable and unambiguous, while also at times appearing abstract, flexible and ambivalent. Her analysis identifies practices of 'ordering' and 'disordering' in the classroom. She argues that the temporal associations enacted by teachers drawing arrows and students turning the page uphold traditional modernist notions of linear causality and chronological progress. However, cork/noticeboards, digital databases or online hypertext enact nonlinear associations, rupturing this linearity. Overall, this dissertation abstract suggests the manifold ways media technologies

enact different realities, orders and associations, by observing how different technologies, as part of micro-practices, unravel in multiple, indeterminate directions.

Students: Adopting and amplifying societal discourse

Three papers in this special issue shed light on students' uptake of the media used in schools. A third dissertation abstract is based on ethnographic fieldwork on teaching about colonialism in high school classrooms in Germany. In *The enacting of belonging and difference. An ethnographic discourse analysis*, Patrick Mielke describes research into how students adopt society's Eurocentric, nationalist and racist imaginaries in subtle, indirect and sometimes inadvertent ways. He attends carefully to how students pick up and reproduce these imaginaries, despite adult stakeholders' explicitly stated intentions to deconstruct Eurocentrism, nationalism and racism. By analysing curricula, textbooks, classroom practices, interviews with teachers, focus group discussions with students, informal chats in the school yard, and selected popular media accounts, Mielke illustrates how 'white' students refract key discursive elements from curricula and popular media to build an understanding of the world and hierarchical global power relations that support and perpetuate an understanding of Germany as 'white'. He reads this as students' narrative competence; despite their teachers' intention to critique colonialism, students successfully tease out—and amplify—the dominant echo of colonial discourse that continues to be implicitly socially acceptable in contemporary Germany.

Teresa Oteíza's linguistic analysis of classroom interactions also orients to the complex dynamics between officially sanctioned discourse and alternative accounts. In *Language resources to negotiate official and alternative memories of human rights violations in Chilean history: A study on classroom interactions*, Oteíza closely tracks the semantic waves in a classroom exchange among teacher and students, to examine how the teacher weaves images and text on a PowerPoint presentation with specialised and non-specialised language. The paper provides researchers with a sophisticated tool for analysing interactions and evaluations in history classrooms. Drawing on systemic functional linguistics and legitimation code theory, alongside observations, video analysis and interviews with the teacher and students, Oteíza is able to demonstrate how the teacher's decision to bring her personal political positioning on human rights violations into the classroom, unfolds as the class builds historical explanations and evaluations. When asked for their reflection on the class, students from across the political spectrum value Salvador Allende as a great leader and condemn the coup d'état. They disagree on how much detail (brutality, torture, and suffering) should be included in history classrooms. Thus, the paper not only shows how personal and social memories are reformulated into broader societal discourse on history, but also points to the double move in history education. On the one hand, despite the teacher's intention to help students make their own judgements, students across the board adopt the politics suggested by the classroom talk. On the other, students' personal and social memories can never be entirely tamed; they peek in at the edges when students evaluate their class.

Whereas Mielke and Oteíza analyse settings in which adult stakeholders' intentions are interrupted by students, Katherine Bischoping and Zhipeng Gao reflect on practices in which moral teachings resonate strongly with interviewees in China, in much the way they were intended, decades after their school years. In *'Learn from Lei Feng!' Education, social context, and generational memories of a Chines Communist hero*, Bischoping and Gao demonstrate the powerful influence of making the past present through songs, films, photographs, textbooks, illustrated storybooks, diaries and other media used in early education. The historic communist role mode, Lei Feng (1940-1962), despite changes to his role over the years, has consistently been used to teach altruism and self-sacrifice. The paper describes the different ways that four 'generations' (defined by age and education) engage with the way learning about Lei Feng has

affected them ('observers', 'devotees', 'transitionals' and 'light-hearted'). A striking finding is the difference between people of the same age (born in the 1950s and 1960s) who received elementary education, including significant exposure to Lei Feng as a role model, and those who had no education. The former are 'devotees', still passionate about Lei Feng, and still evidencing a revolutionary subjectivity, in their recent interviews. The latter are 'observers'; they know of Lei Feng, but are detached from the story, reflecting from a distance on the values he was supposed to embody. What is fascinating about this difference is that these interviewees grew up in the same socio-political context. Yet their differing engagement with school-based media has made a dramatic difference to their affective immersion in Lei Feng's story and their embodiment (or not) of the values associated with his life. The 'transitionals', who met impassioned materials about Lei Feng in school but were socialised in an increasingly consumerist and individualistic society, continue to feel the impact of Lei Feng as a role model, but find sophisticated rationalisations for why they do not (need to) live up to his standards. They live within the ambivalence, finding, for instance, new poems to express the tensions of making Lei Feng present in today's China.

Non-coherence: Holding together unruly genres of practice, coexisting pasts, and authenticity and artificiality

Three papers alert us to non-coherence. In searching for a word to capture the blurring of genres of practice foregrounded in Duygu Gül Kaya's paper, we rejected 'hybrid' or 'merging'. Hybrid presupposes the existence of two separate entities which come together; merging also assumes the pre-existence of bounded entities. Yet in *Blurring the lines between history education and activism: How 100 Voices remembers the Armenian genocide*, Gül Kaya traces how a multimedia project in Canada overthrows notions of pre-existing genres boundaries. The genres of history education and of activism are no longer docile, orderly and governable, but unruly: doing history education as activism (or doing activism as history education) overflows traditional practices. Analysing the students' video testimonies (available on YouTube) about the genocide in Armenia, and interviews with the production team, teachers and students, Gül Kaya considers how digital media technologies have changed ways of making the past present. On the one hand, she shows how the *100 Voices* project creates coherent versions of the past: the Armenian genocide as an atrocity that needs to be remembered to help students to see history from below, understand human tragedy and feel empathy for the suffering of others. It aims to empower students to act as change agents. By participating in the project, young people shaped their own identities as both *specifically-Armenian* youth whose daily lives are impacted by the reverberations from past genocide, and also as activists for *universally-relevant* human rights. Their practice in the unruly blurred space of digital-history-activism-education makes the specific past present as a universal issue. On the other hand, Gül Kaya draws our attention to breaks and ruptures. While editing, the production team cut out silences, hesitations and other moments of non-coherence. What happens in these silences goes beyond the scope of the paper, but it hints at further ways the participants' identities spill beyond the two identities (Armenian youth and human rights activist) that are foregrounded through their video work. One specificity of video as a technology is that these silences may be edited out, whereas deletions in written texts are rarely perceptible to readers, the cut is visible to viewers. The work that goes into creating coherence can be seen.

A far more critical approach to remembrance activism is taken in Jaroslav Najbert's paper, *Guarding against the 'loss of national memory': The communist past as a controversial issue in Czech history education*. In the Czech Republic, young people learn from an early age that 'communism is bad', as one young person formulates it in this paper. Najbert teases out the epistemic and political impact when students realise that different accounts of the state socialist

era coexist in society, some of which are fond remembrances of life becoming easier, of foreign travel, and strong community relationships. The cognitive unrest experienced by students when family memories contradict the totalitarian paradigm promoted by remembrance activists (human rights and other non-governmental organisations) opens space for unruly ways of making the past present. When students not only engage with the coherent anti-communist histories in officially sanctioned educational media or activist educational projects, but also with family memory, pop culture and other alternative media practices, they make the past present in its non-coherence. This valuing of coexisting pasts, Najbert argues, is sorely lacking in current educational materials in the Czech Republic, since the main online sites for finding primary sources, documentaries or other materials are run by remembrance agents. Since their primary interest lies in condemning the communist past, these materials cannot support students to understand how historical narratives are created. By engaging with alternative educational media, including family narratives, alongside the dominant materials, students question the apparent consensus in society. They consider ambiguity, controversy and, perhaps, the coexistence of ontologically different pasts.

The 'authenticity' of family memory is not questioned in Najbert's paper. But what happens when deliberately artificial materials are used in history education? Although firmly rooted in constructivist pedagogy and prioritising the goals of critical disciplinary thinking (for example, student reflection, multiple perspectives, dispassionate analysis, metacognitive dimension of knowledge, active learning, independent knowledge construction), we read Jaroslav Pinkas and Tereza Hannemann's paper as holding together different paradigms of history education. In *A computer simulation in the context of history teaching in Czech schools: Using the 'Czechoslovakia 38-89' educational simulation*, Pinkas and Hannemann present an adventure game which explicitly uses non-authentic life stories to construct eyewitness testimonies. The testimonies use comic strip flashbacks and direct narratives in which an actor speaks (of a constructed life) to camera. This use of visibly artificial semiotic materials and the foregrounding of the virtual/semi-fictive stories within a game environment opens novel dynamics in history education. The students 'stay inside' the story (by, for example, controlling the game dynamics) and are simultaneously kept 'outside' the story (through the alienating artificial elements). The paper includes reflections from teachers and students on using the gaming simulation. Students, for instance, appreciated when the 'eyewitness' was able to 'act' authentically. This did not, however, lead to a critical analysis of witness testimony. A core insight is Pinkas and Hannemann's reflection on a bundle of ambivalences: Synthetic/prosthetic memories emerge under today's conditions of algorithmic control; yet it may be precisely our awareness of this artificiality that enables an autonomous, albeit perhaps uncritical, understanding of how the past is made present.

Overall, each paper in this special issue reflects on the question of how the past is made present in (history) education with the use of particular media. They focus on diverse issues to unpack this broad question into specific analyses, exploring in particular how students do history and enact memory practices, and the epistemic and affective work of holding non-coherences together, whether these are apparently non-coherent genres of practices (history education and activism), ambivalent pasts (coded as trauma or fondness) or authentic and artificial game elements. Considering the challenges currently facing the critical disciplinary thinking approach to history education, we hope this special issue contributes to the debate on the political nature of history education by bringing attention to concepts such as non-coherence and indeterminacy. We are very grateful to the contributors to this special issue, for ongoing discussions and reflections, and also for their patience during the publication process. By exploring the (unruly) practices of making the past present with media in specific educational settings, the contributors have found a fresh empirical angle beyond normative expectations. This enables them to approach the doings and sayings of the history classroom not only as

cognitive learning activities that are right or wrong, but as memory practices and the 'doing' of history, firmly situated within a wider indeterminate, material-semiotic, socio-political environment.

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Endnotes

[1] Since the theoretical advances on 'doing history', 'doing memory' and 'memory practices' are converging, and since the debates over where 'history' ends and 'memory' begins have become somewhat tired, we have decided in this special issue to use history and memory interchangeably: Our core interest is in 'making the past present', and whether this is called 'history' or 'memory' is not central to the discussions here.

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