

# What is History Teaching?

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## Abstract

*This article looks at the nature of history and how we can teach history as a discipline. It suggests several steps that teachers may want to use to teach history as an investigation as well as how to do history in the field.*

## Introduction

What are your memories of how you were taught history? I was born in the era, when we had history as a subject at primary level. My experience of history at the primary level was that of a story told. Sometimes the stories were interesting, if I had a teacher who was a good storyteller, sometimes not. At the lower secondary level, we underlined 'important' points in our textbook and at the upper secondary level, we took notes, which the teacher dictated from her notebook. For the 'A' levels, we referred to our textbooks, as our teachers lectured. My experience as a student of history for the first 12 years of my education is that history is a story told, of some events in the past which had nothing to do with me as all I was required to do was memorise the information taught and regurgitate it during examinations. Up to this point, History to me equaled the past as that was what I was told and I could read about the past from the textbooks which we did not question. However, the past will remain in the past unless someone records it or someone attempts to recreate it by looking at the records left behind. It was only at the university level that my experience of history changed as we examined different

perspectives through different readings or sources and wrote our own accounts based on these readings. So what is history and how do we teach history?

Many of us were taught history as a body of knowledge to be memorised and forgotten after our examinations. Did you have the same experience? Or were you a product of the syllabus change in 2000 whereby you were taught content followed by source-based questions but without seeing the relationship between the two? Many history teachers when interviewed could not tell me whether history was a discipline as they were never taught the processes of historical investigation. However, they were able to articulate that science is a discipline as they had to do laboratory work when they were in school. Thus, our belief or understanding about a subject is also formed by how we were taught it in school.

## What is History?

Marwick defines history as "the bodies of knowledge about the past produced by historians, together with everything that is involved in the production, communication of, and teaching about that knowledge" (Marwick, 2001). The Greek word for history is *ιστορία*, "historia" meaning to inquire (Joseph & Janda, 2008). Inquiry is defined as "seeking the truth, information or knowledge; seeking information by questioning (Dictionary.com). However, as in any discipline, History is not only about seeking information or getting content information. It is also about understanding what the discipline is about. Mansilla and

Gardner (1997) define understanding as the ability to think with knowledge within a specific domain. They divide understanding into two dimensions: “domain-specific knowledge” and “understanding of the disciplinary modes of thinking embodied in the methods by which knowledge is constructed, the forms in which knowledge is made public and the purposes that drive inquiry in the domain” (Mansilla & Gardner, 1997, p. 382). This according to Nichol and Dean (1997) is the “know how” or the process of “doing history”. Thus, the discipline of history is one whereby historians construct the past by interpreting the available evidence. Thus, learning history should not be about memorising facts. Students of history should inquire into the past by using the available evidence to construct the past, just as science students conduct laboratory experiments to prove a hypothesis.

### **History Allows Us to Acquire Historical Understanding**

It is through the study of a broad sweep of history that we understand why certain things or events change and why some continue. History also shows us the many ways in which problems are posed and resolved in society. “We learn to recognise and weigh the different interests, beliefs, experiences and circumstances that guide human beings in their societies. History enables us to understand how such interests, beliefs and experiences drive human beings to construct knowledge, and makes us aware of the value of knowledge and of its relative nature” (Lacoursiere, 1996).

Knowledge of the past is essential to society. What happens in the present and what will happen in the future are essentially governed by what happened in the past. To make judgements about events

that happen in the present without fully understanding what led to them in the past is like people making judgements of you without understanding how you came to be what you are today.

### **History and Social Studies**

In the United States, History falls under the umbrella of social studies as do other subjects in the social sciences. In Singapore, it is studied as a standalone subject at the secondary level. History is the study of the human past and human contributions which led to historical events. Social studies, on the other hand focuses on society as a collective human entity. It is the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. “The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994). Both subjects use inquiry as a key pedagogical approach. History plays an important role in social studies. It plays an important role in developing citizenship as history helps to train the mind.

History’s habits of mind (NCHE, n.d) empower and enable individuals to:

1. Grasp the significance of the past in shaping the present,
2. Perceive past events and issues as they might have been experienced by the people of the time, with historical empathy rather than present-mindedness,
3. Read critically, to discern differences between evidence and assertion and to frame useful and appropriate questions about the past,
4. Interrogate texts and artifacts, posing questions about the past that foster

- informed discussion, reasoned debate and evidence-based interpretation,
5. Recognize that history is an evolving narrative constructed from available sources, cogent inferences and changing interpretations,
  6. Appreciate the diversity of cultures and variety of historical contexts, as well as to distinguish elements of our shared humanity,
  7. Understand the impact made by individuals, groups and institutions at local, national and global levels both in effecting change and in ensuring continuity,
  8. Realize that all individuals are decision makers, but that personal and public choices are often restricted by time, place and circumstance,
  9. Negotiate a complex, often uncertain and ambiguous world, equipped with the appreciation for multiple perspectives, and
  10. Engage in patient reflection and constant reexamination of the past and present.

### **Teaching for Historical Understanding**

In teaching for historical understanding, teachers need to consider two broad groups of concepts – substantive concepts and procedural concepts.

#### ***1. Substantive Concepts***

Historians use evidence to create a construction of the past. The account that is written and the concepts that accompany these accounts, such as civilisation, governments, and colony are known as the substance of history (substantive knowledge) (Schwab, 1964). Concepts are not just names. Understanding concepts involves knowing a set of rules and being able to identify instances of that rule (National Research Council, 2005).

### **How Might We Teach Substantive Concepts?**

In the article on “Identifying What to Teach: Using Concepts, Generalizations and Driving Questions”, you have been given some suggestions on some pedagogies that will help you to teach concepts. Here is another suggestion.

Take a look at your syllabus. Identify the history components.

Take the topic “civilisations” – what in the topic is important enough for you to teach so that students achieve understanding? Is it what is written in your textbook – the Indus Civilisation or Shang Civilisation, or is it the concept of “civilisation”? Which method would lead to deep understanding which would allow your students to transfer that knowledge to new situations?

To teach a substantive concept like “civilisation” you can use either the deductive approach or inductive method. With the deductive approach you give the students the definition (in this case what are the features that would identify a community as a “civilisation”) and then use the various civilisations in your textbook to illustrate the features. With the inductive approach, you and your students try to find the features of each civilisation under study from the textbook. From there induce what the features of a civilisation are. Once your students can identify the features that make up a civilisation, they should then be able apply this conceptual understanding to identify any other community that they come across to judge whether the community is a civilisation. If you just teach them about a particular civilisation and get them to memorise and regurgitate the information about this particular civilisation, students will not have developed deep understanding and

may not be able to transfer learnt knowledge to new situations.

## 2. *Procedural Concepts*

Another aspect of the knowledge bases of history is historical procedures. This deals with how historians construct their knowledge. Understanding this knowledge is very important as the discipline of history is not about memorizing factual information but is a multidimensional process. If all we do when we teach history is story telling or getting students to get their information from the textbook, then we are doing the discipline an injustice and not allowing our students to understand the complex procedures involved in “doing history”. Moreover, history offers a storehouse of complex and rich problems, that which we confront daily in the world. Examining these problems requires an interpretive acumen that extends beyond the ‘locate information in the text’ skills that dominate many school tasks. The study of history should be an experience in authentic problem solving as this is what the historian does when he finally writes his accounts.

To demonstrate historical understanding, students need to be able to use important historical concepts. They also need to understand the methods of a historian and the criteria that knowledgeable people (historians) have developed to build a comprehensive historical account. They need to appreciate the purposes that inspire the writing of a historical account and they need to be able to use such work to understand why the world in which they live in is the way it is today.

To reach a sophisticated historical understanding, content should be shaped by second-order concepts and historical procedures, also known as syntactic

knowledge (Cercadillo, 2001) These are concepts that give shape to the discipline of history. To acquire historical understanding students should go through the process of doing history. In constructing the past, students of history will encounter the following:

1. Evidence – the concept of evidence is central to history because it is only through the use of evidence that historians are able to write their accounts.
2. Historical empathy – this involves explaining that what people did in the past make sense in terms of their ideas about the world and when students read the evidence, they have to put themselves in the shoes of these people in their time and place.
3. Causation – this is not only about people’s reasons for acting in a particular way, it is also about why large-scale events or processes occurred. Causes is not just a list of events. Historians tend to pick out only necessary conditions from a wider set. If these necessary conditions did not occur, then the event would not have occurred.
4. Time – The concepts of time and change are central to history. However, history deals with time over a long duration. Thus primary school students may have trouble estimating the long duration of time that a historian deals with and trying to transfer their preconceived ideas about time may pose a problem for students studying history.
5. Change and Continuity – history deals with change over long scales, not moment to moment change. Connected to the notion of change is the notion of continuity. There is no notion that nothing has occurred. Rather, though there is no change, certain things continue.

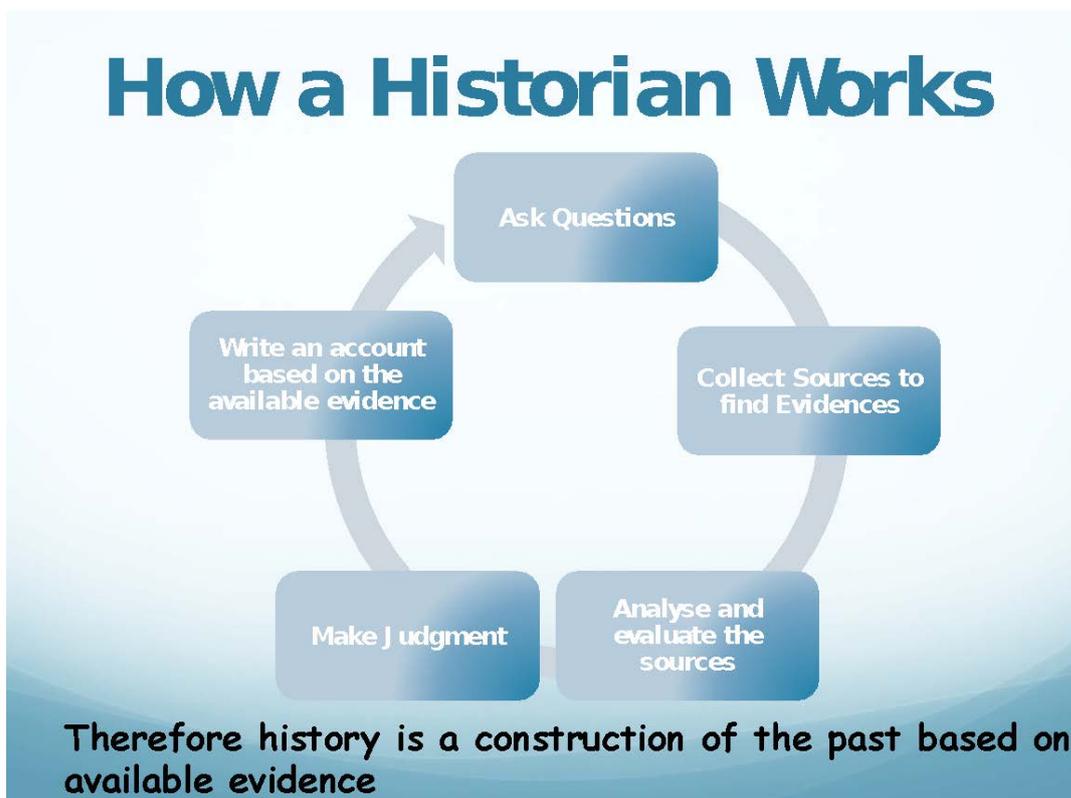
6. Accounts – this concept is related to that of evidence. Accounts deal with how students view historical narratives. Many young students tend to accept what they read especially if it is in their textbook, as true or accurate.

So how then do we teach history so that students will encounter the complexity of this subject and see the relevance in studying it? This should be through historical inquiry. Like detectives who solve their crimes by looking for clues to help them to solve the case, students too should be detectives. The difference is that their clues are the sources left behind from the past. By doing this they emulate what historians do.

### Historical Inquiry

When we conduct a historical inquiry, we are basically experiencing the same process that a historian encounters as he does his investigation. A historian would have an area of history he is interested in studying further. He would come up with a hypothesis or a question which he hopes to investigate. However, unlike our students, the historian would already have read substantially in that area. He would then collect sources to gather evidence for his investigation. He would analyse and evaluate the sources and then make a judgment about his investigation. He would finally write his account either as an article or a book based on the available evidence. See Figure 1.

**Figure 1: How a Historian Works**



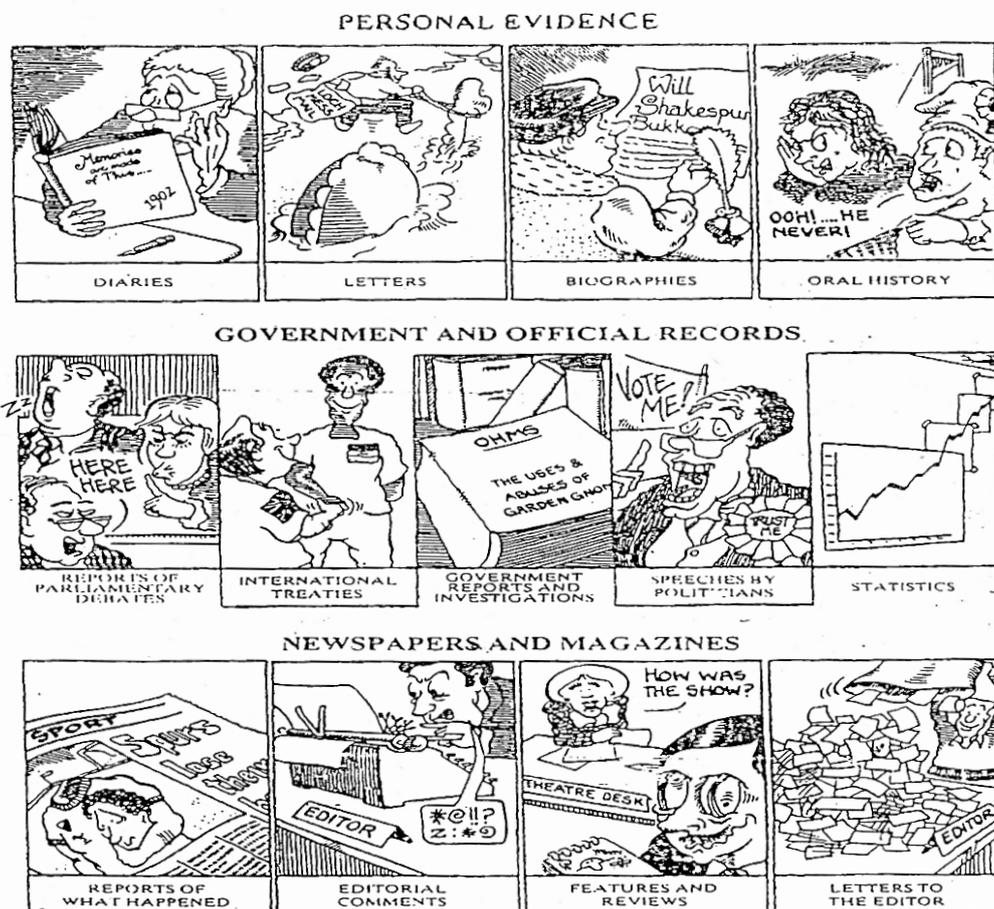
**What are Sources and Evidence?**

A source is a document, newspaper, book, picture, diary, headstone, cartoon, building, novel, poem, video, etc. It is anything that gives a historian information which could be used as evidence to draw a conclusion about an historical event or issue. It is only when the source has relevance to the historian's investigation that it is known as an evidence.

Sources can be primary or secondary sources. At its most basic level, primary sources are things that are left behind by the people of the era we are investigating. Secondary sources are second hand accounts of a historical event.

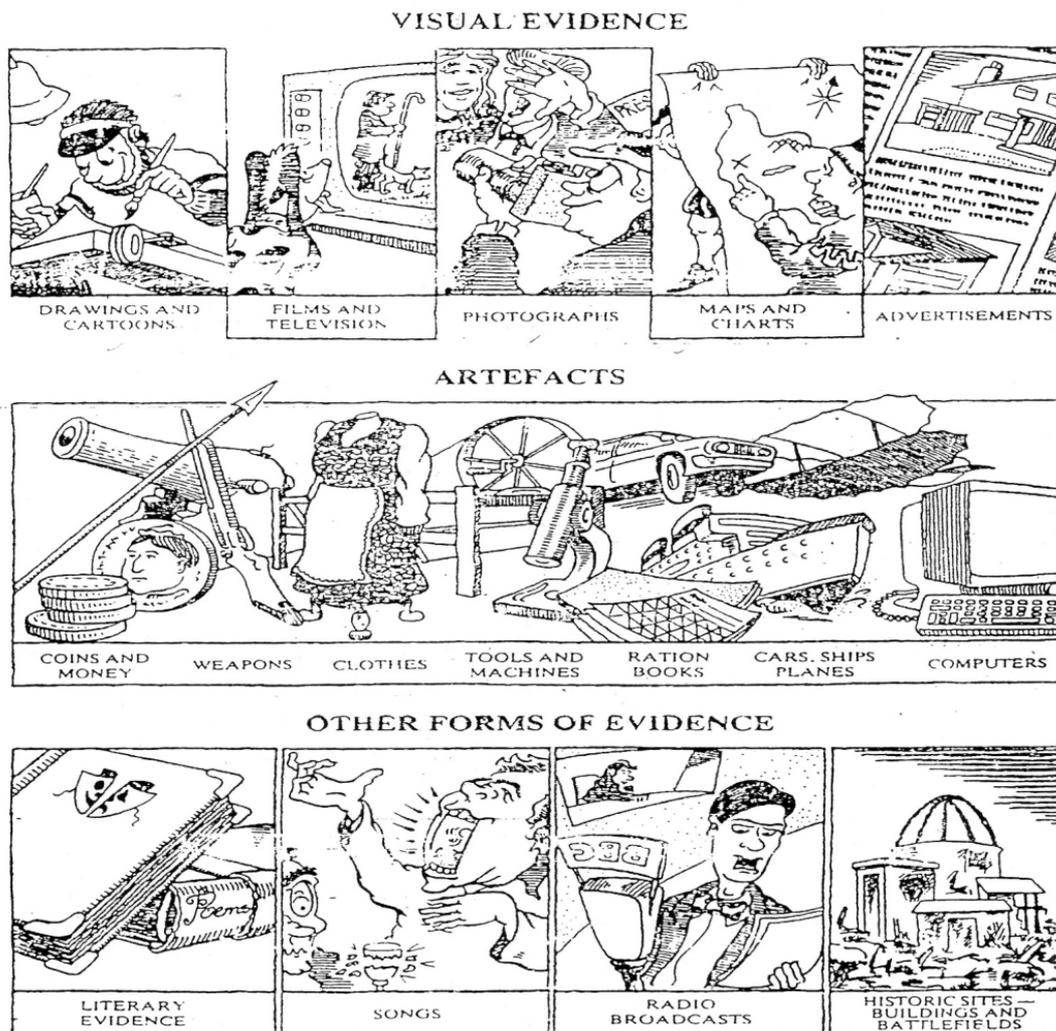
Figures 2 and 3 are some samples of sources that historians use (Wolfson & Aylett, 1988).

**Figure 2: Examples of Sources for Investigating History**



Source: Wolfson, R. & Aylett, J.F. (1988). *Examining the Evidence*. London: Hodder Arnold.

**Figure 3: More Examples of Sources for Investigating History**



Source: Wolfson, R. & Aylett, J.F. (1988). *Examining the Evidence*. London: Hodder Arnold.

***An Investigation in the Classroom***

In teaching the disciplinary procedures of history, students need to realise that history is a construct of the past. A detective, who attempts to solve a crime would look for clues, make inferences from the clues and come to a conclusion as to who the murderer was, how a crime was committed, etc. The historian’s investigation is not about a mystery that just happened but one that happened long ago. His clues would be the traces of the past (sources) that have been left behind.

The main pedagogy used should be the inquiry approach. This entails the teacher setting up an inquiry with a question.

For a simple inquiry, students may want to do an “archaeological dig”. For the topic on civilisations, the teacher can come up with boxes with layers of evidence (artefacts). The students can then infer what they think that box tells them about that ‘civilisation’.

Below is the cycle of how you may want to conduct your investigation.

### **Step One**

Before the students start their inquiry, the teacher should set the context of the inquiry so that students do not come into the inquiry without the background or contextual knowledge that most historians would have. Moreover, without the context, students would find it difficult to apply historical empathy to their inquiry (not that contextual knowledge alone would help students practise historical empathy).

There are various strategies teachers can use in the process of “doing history”. Teachers can start the inquiry by storytelling to garner your students’ interest and at the same time giving them contextual knowledge. Or, if it so happens that what is in your syllabus happens to explain some problem that is happening in the world today, teachers can get students to read the article in the newspaper to hook their interest and then get them to investigate the past to explain why this problem exists, for example, an issue on migration in the present. Teachers can also show them a comic strip as a starter to get them interested.

### **Step Two**

The teacher may give the students a set of sources that they would use as evidence. These are the clues left behind to help the historian investigate the past. Not all sources would become evidences for the investigation. Since we are dealing with the primary level, teachers may want to choose sources that specifically help the students answer the investigation. The sources should be edited to suit the reading ability of the students without changing the meaning of the source. Sources should also show various perspectives so that students will realise that the construction of an account is not so straight forward as their textbook makes it out to be.

The teacher can scaffold the students’ reading of the sources by giving them reading frames to help them draw out the crux of the evidence that is related to the inquiry. They can get the students to ask the “Who, what, when, where, how” questions to draw out the relevant information needed to aid them in their investigation. The teacher can also help students by giving them scaffolding questions to help them read the sources.

### **Step Three**

The next stage in the process of “doing history” is to get students to analyze the sources. Some students may need guidance at this stage. Teachers can provide some guiding questions or hints to help students along.

### **Step Four**

Students make a judgement and come to a conclusion about the investigation.

### **Step Five**

Students write their accounts based on the available evidence. It does not necessarily have to be in an essay form. Depending on their age, ability or the different learning styles, students can do storytelling, write a diary, write a newspaper article or even draw their own comic strips about the inquiry that they have just done. The ways in which the teacher can assess for understanding of the investigation is limitless, as long as the conclusion that their students have arrived at is based on the available evidence.

The pedagogy suggested above outlines an investigation in the classroom. Students become detectives of the past using the sources that teachers give them to use as evidences to write their own accounts. Thus, pupils construct history.

### ***An Investigation in the Field***

Historical inquiry can also be carried out in the field. An investigation in the field must be planned like a lesson. In other words, it must still have an introduction, body and conclusion. The syllabus offers a great deal of potential for field investigation in areas like Kampong Glam, Chinatown and Little India. The field studies need not be directly related to the topics in the syllabus but may be an enrichment of their understanding of what they have been taught from the syllabus or an extension of the skills of investigation as they deal with actual artefacts out in the field – they thus are given an opportunity to engage in authentic investigation.

#### **Reconnaissance**

Teachers should research the site they want to bring their students to, come up with an investigation and objectives and then do a reconnaissance of the site. They should then decide what activities they want the students to do on the site. Re-look your lesson objectives and align your activities in the field with your lesson objectives.

#### **Step One – Pre-fieldtrip**

You then start planning. Consider what students need to know in the introduction – if it is part of the syllabus, then it may be an activity to prepare them for the field trip – a starter activity. If the field investigation is an enrichment of the syllabus, ensure that there are introductory activities that help students to contextualize what they are doing. It is best to provide background information in the classroom and not in the field.

#### **Step Two – In the Field**

Remember in a field investigation,

students should interact with the artefactual evidences and other sources on the site. They should not be spending their time listening to a mini-lecture on site.

#### **Step Three – Post-investigation**

Teachers should ensure that there is a proper conclusion to the field investigation when students are back in the classroom. Have students reflect on what they have learnt from their field study. They can also prepare an exhibition to share their findings with the school.

### **Video Showcasing an Exemplary History Lesson**

You may want to look at this video (weblink below) to look at how this teacher conducts an in-class archaeological dig as well as address both substantive and syntactic concepts in history to help her students achieve historical understanding in a series of lessons.

<http://learner.org/libraries/socialstudies/68/larsen/video.html>

Below is the video summary. I have put in brackets some of the historical (substantive and syntactic) concepts that you will see in the video. You may want to watch the video and draw out more of the historical concepts that the teacher brings across in this series of lessons.

### ***Explorations in Archaeology and History***

**Video Summary:** How can ancient history and archaeology be brought to life in the classroom? To launch her lesson on world civilizations, Gwen Larsen begins by looking at each student's personal history. By taking on the roles of archaeologists (*in-classroom field trip*) and presenting their own heirlooms (*artefacts*)

and oral history), students learn how to decipher artefacts (use of evidence) and make connections to the past.

Students create "identity cubes" to illustrate elements of their personal histories. Then, the class works together to define history and archaeology and to learn archaeology terms (substantive concepts) and methods. Presented with artefacts and representations of fossils, students begin the process of questioning, classifying, drawing, and describing (using artefacts as evidence).

On day two of the lesson, students bring in heirlooms -- family artefacts, for example -- they might want to pass on. Then, students draw and describe the meanings of their heirlooms and present them to the class (using artefacts as evidence, and timeline).

### Conclusion

History is not just about telling stories. In teaching history, our goal is helping our children develop historical understanding through learning the substantive and syntactic concepts. It is important for students to understand and practice the process of historical inquiry. In the process of constructing their own historical account, students would have had the opportunity to apply syntactic knowledge. While reading the sources, they should read with an empathetic mind, analysing and making judgements of the sources and the events and people under investigation in the time and place of the people, not based on a presentist view, as the context of the time, our values and beliefs are different from people of an earlier era. Depending on the investigation, students may need to make judgements about whether things have changed over time, or continued from the past. If the investigation is about why certain things

happened, students would then have to apply causal reasoning, deciding whether certain causes are underlying, latent, long term, short term, or immediate. Thus, in doing history, students would go through the inquiry cycle using the syntactic knowledge that all historians use that would help them to derive the substantive knowledge. In this way, it is hoped that students would acquire a set of skills that would make them valued members of their community.

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