

Rethinking the Approach to Teaching Causation in the History Classroom

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Introduction

Core to historical research and the teaching of history is the concept of causation – in fact, E. H. Carr (1961: 87) famously opined, “the study of history is a study of causes”. Without an awareness and understanding of the concept of causation, it would be difficult to comprehend the reasons why events happened the way they did, and that evidence could be marshalled within a historical context to justify the relative hierarchy of factors for any given historical occurrence. However, based on my teaching experience and interaction with other teachers as well as feedback from students, I discovered that students found it difficult to make causal explanations that harnessed their knowledge and understanding of events in history. Specifically, these difficulties included their inability to construct viable historical explanations and to evaluate the relative importance of certain causes in explaining an event, development or action. This article describes an intervention carried out in a school in Singapore in 2015, using ideas and strategies developed by history educators related to the concept of historical causation and the ways to improve students’ causal reasoning skills.

Challenges in teaching historical causation

Scott (1990) broadly defined causation as

an understanding of the difference between long-term and short-term causes; an understanding that some causes are likely to be more important than others; an appreciation of the difference between, and the interdependence of, motivatory and enabling factors; and an understanding of the inter-relationship of different causatory factors.

(Scott, 1990: 9 cited in Phillips, 2002: 42)

However, many students in Shemilt’s Evaluation Study of the Schools History Project (SHP) seemed to “misconstrue even the most apparently self-evident features of the causality concept” (Shemilt, 1980: 30). The tendency was for these students to see causation as “something with the power to make something else happen” (Shemilt, 1980: 30). Exacerbating this issue was the students’ inability to understand “motivated action” as they “insist[ed] on seeing History as a record of *what happened to people* rather than of *what they made happen*” (Shemilt, 1980: 32) [emphasis mine]. Much of Shemilt’s findings pointed to apparent difficulties students faced when trying to make causal explanations.

Research evidence from other studies also showed that students struggled with effective causal reasoning. For example, they were likely to view causation as mono-causal instead of an inter-twining of complex causal factors, or were

predisposed to seeing causes as being the facts themselves (Haydn, *et al*, 2015: 146). Although the “analytic imperative of a causation question was clear” to teachers (Counsell, 2011: 109), research evidence seemed to suggest conceptual difficulties on the part of students when handling aspects related to causality. Factors that may explain these difficulties include:

- a) students’ inability to harness in-depth knowledge and use of historical context for effective causal explanation (Chapman and Facey, 2009);
- b) the influence of scientific and mathematical modes of explanation affecting students’ concept of causality in history (Shemilt, 1980);
- c) complexity in the language of causation (Woodcock, 2005; 2011) and differing children’s “starting points” about explanation that inhibited their understanding (Lee, 2001).

In addition, the issues, concepts and vocabularies that undergirded discussions and explanations of causation proved equally complex. As Lee (1978) aptly postulated, causal explanation in history required attention to both detail and generality of events (that may account for the “set of initial conditions” prior to the event), as well as the consideration of “past human action” (1978: 73) that may have caused the event. Therefore, history, as the “study of change and development of human affairs over time”, required the “identification and examination of causal connections between both actions and events” (Thompson, 1984: 177-8). Collectively, these contributed to the apparent conceptual difficulties many students encountered when making sense of causal relationships in history.

Causality is a difficult concept for students to grasp, and this can often be seen (or is manifested) in their writing. So what are some common mistakes students are likely to make when constructing causal explanations? Apart from incorporating irrelevant material in their essays, Chapman and Woodcock (2006: 17) highlighted some key mistakes students frequently made when constructing causal explanations. These included listing causes that go unexplained, discussing causes without showing understanding of the events that they were studying, and discussing outcomes as though they were “fixed” without considering possibilities or probabilities.

Table 1 shows a student’s response (Student B) in my study to a question on the fairness of the Treaty of Versailles. The student had described the unhappiness of the Germans towards the Treaty without first explaining how these individual events, for example, the near-complete destruction of Northern French soil had resulted in French resentment, thus creating fertile conditions for a vengeful French team at the Paris Peace Conferences. This had ensured a largely punitive outcome in the form of the Treaty of Versailles for the Germans. In this instance, the student had merely used these events without establishing a link with claims of fairness asserted by different parties for the Treaty of Versailles. The way the student viewed the perceived fairness is akin to a “one-way street of knock-on causes and effects” (p. 46). This idea appeared consistent with Level 3 responses in Lee and Shemilt’s (2009) progression model for causal explanation. By not establishing which factors or the respective roles they played in influencing the outcome of the Treaty, the student appeared unable to use these factors to discuss which factors had had a greater impact in determining the outcome for the Treaty of Versailles.

Table 1: Extract of essay written by Student B

QUESTION: 'THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES WAS A FAIR TREATY'. HOW FAR DO YOU AGREE WITH THIS STATEMENT? EXPLAIN YOUR ANSWER.

However, the Treaty is also somewhat fair in view of the Allies. Northern French soil was almost completely destroyed after the war ended as the war was mainly fought on French soil. This made the French angry and bore hatred towards the Germans. The other Allies also suffered great losses and since the Germans in their eyes, had started the war, it was only right to impose harsh consequences on the Germans and make them pay for the Allies' losses. Thus, the treaty was also a fair one on the side of the Allies.

Conceptualizing interventions that support the teaching of causal reasoning skills

What, then, would the implications for the teaching of effective causal reasoning skills mean in the classroom? For one, teachers may need to be precise in what they would like students to understand about historical causation. In that regard, Chambers (2007)'s suggestions seemed invaluable. He proposed that teachers should:

- identify the topics in the syllabus that can best serve the teaching of causation;
- understand the possible learning objectives with regard to causation:
 - knowledge of the causes of the event
 - identifying causes embedded within the narrative
 - understanding the roles played by different causes
 - making linkages between the causes
 - organizing the causes into categories
 - distinguishing between the long-term (trends) and short-term

(triggers) causes of events

- coming up with a hierarchy of importance of causes
- frame an appropriate inquiry question that will help students understand, think and develop causal reasoning;
- be aware of the need to provide vocabulary, information and scaffolds to guide students to develop causal reasoning

(Chambers, 2007:50-58).

In conceptualizing approaches for teaching students causal thinking and explanation, I became cognizant of the following when planning lessons that incorporated causation-related topics:

- a) the *difficulties* students are likely to face in understanding causation-related topics;
- b) the teachers' *objectives* for the lessons; as well as
- c) the *pedagogical interventions* that may allow enabled students to develop the skills of causal explanation.

Potentially, teachers may encounter two aspects related to students' ideas about cause/consequence when helping

them understand the nature of historical causation. First, as Lee (2005: 49) opined, students held simple views of the consequences of human agency, and perhaps may arrive at the conclusion that since no historically significant character performed a particular action, then “nothing happened”, and there was no consequence. Second, students tended to view causal factors as “discrete entities, acting independently from each other”, in contrast to a complex web of “relationships among a network of events, processes and states of affairs” (Lee, 2005: 52). This could indicate one of two possible things: (a) students simply added the number of causal factors (or lack thereof) to “make something happen” – essentially, “the bigger the event, the longer the list needs to be” (Lee, 2005: 52), or (b) students may postulate that the independence of causal factors meant that multiple factors can only bring about some event in a “linear”, sequential way (e.g. first Cause A, then Cause B) (Lee, 2005: 52-53).

Designing the intervention

My small-scale study focused on connecting current research literature on causality to a practical implementation in the history classroom for a group of 13 students. An important research strategy was to design an intervention that teachers can use to help students develop better causal reasoning skills. Although I was taken by many fascinating ideas found in the research literature for causality, I was confronted with three key considerations, not dissimilar to Scott (2006), when postulating a suitable approach, amidst tight curriculum time constraints, for working with the students in my study:

a) How can I design an intervention that **drew upon current**

research literature on causality that can be meaningfully used for teaching history in the classrooms?

b) How can students be helped – within limited curriculum time constraints – to **answer a causation question with clarity, confidence and clear conceptual understanding?**

c) How can students internalize a structured approach to answering causation-based questions so that they can **repeat the process independently and confidently?**

With these considerations in mind, I designed a series of lessons to support the teaching of the concept rather than introducing causation as one particular objective or part of a lesson (Haydn *et al*, 2015: 145). I also strove to design a variety of activities and ensure that they fitted the tight constraints of time but was stimulating and relevant for improving causal reasoning in students. Key activities included card sorting and group work activities that promoted pair and whole-class discussion with elements of collaboration. A form of “concept gym and exercise” activity (Chapman and Facey, 2009: 93) in the tale of Alphonse the Camel was also used towards the end of the sequence of lessons. This was to help students tie in the factors exemplified in the camel’s tale with their newly acquired understanding about the Cold War, and also to consolidate and apply their understanding of causation as a concept. Apart from enhancing students’ conceptual understanding, I also used Woodcock’s (2005 and 2011) linguistic strategies, especially his key activity of involving students in using a range of words apart from the “blunt word ‘cause’” and incorporating words like “trigger”, “latent” or “exacerbate” that showed “chronological timing, speed or importance” (Woodcock, 2011: 127).

Equipped with the necessary and appropriate vocabulary and scaffolds, these would hopefully enable students to better grapple with the language of causation.

I designed my lessons based on the first two topics of the students' next unit inquiry, ***"How did the Cold War impact the world order in the post-1945 years?"*** that was to be taught for a period of eight weeks. The first phase would be a three-week module – comprising 9 lessons or 105 minutes per week – on the origins of the Cold War. Subsequently, a five-week module on the reasons for the Korean War (1950-1953) was conducted to address any shortcomings surfaced during the first phase. For the purpose of this article, discussion will focus only on the first phase of the intervention.

Fronting the entire inquiry process for the first phase of the intervention was the key question: ***"To what extent was conflicting ideology the main reason for the origin and development of the Cold War?"*** This three-week module provided students with an opportunity to explore the complexity and the inter-connectedness of the factors that contributed to the outbreak of the Cold War. Through the inquiry, students learnt about the fundamental ideological conflict between the USA and the USSR, and evaluated the role of superpower rivalry in escalating tensions. This was intended to move the issue beyond the 'blame game', a dominant feature of early historiography, which sought to ascribe responsibility to mere human agency.

After an introductory lesson focused on unpacking the inquiry question and introducing to students the concept of Cold War, the next two lessons examined the immediate impact of World War II on Europe and explained

how conflicting ideology contributed to the origin and development of the Cold War. The second lesson incorporated an inductive concept development activity that not only tapped on students' prior knowledge to form their own understanding of the two concepts, but allowed students to better understand the differences between Communism and Capitalism through the use of a card-sort activity. This set the stage for them to assess how far fundamental differences could lead to conflict between the two superpowers. In the third lesson, the focus zoomed in on how superpower rivalry manifested itself in the actions and reactions of the USA and USSR (e.g. Truman Doctrine, Marshall Plan, Berlin Blockade, etc.), and required students to assess how such actions might have escalated tensions and contributed to the Cold War. A key activity in lesson three was a ranking exercise where students had to determine and evaluate the relative importance in each action or reaction by the superpowers. In the final lesson, after showing students a chronological outline, the analogy of Alphonse the Camel was introduced to sum up key learning points, after which students were asked to write the essay at home.

Evaluating the effectiveness of the intervention

In order to determine whether the first phase of the intervention had been successful, triangulation – based on the principle of "confirming findings through multiple perspectives" (Evans, 2013: 151) – of different types of data was used. To gauge how well students have improved in their causal reasoning abilities, I collected three students' writing prior to this intervention. They had undergone one year's worth of lessons so this served as a good indicator of where they stood prior to intervention. Following the three weeks'

intervention, I surveyed the students to elicit feedback on what they have learnt from this three-week module. The three students' work were analysed to ascertain the extent to which they have grasped the first phase of lessons, especially with regard to how they applied knowledge and understanding of causation to their essay writing. Thereafter, I slightly tweaked the lesson plans focusing on the reasons for the Korean War to incorporate additional details or to address any misconceptions that may have emerged from the initial three-week intervention.

From my observations, it was apparent that the students were beginning to grasp the 'language of causation'. It seemed that they were not only more responsive and less reliant on the teacher for ready-made answers but also showed increased confidence in connecting what they had studied from the lessons about the Cold War. They also were able to express their understanding of how causes operated in the context of how events happened.

Some of the students also believed that they learnt more about causation as shown in their written reflections, each revealing varying degrees of understanding and sophistication:

I have learnt that things might not always be so simple and direct by only having one cause to lead to an effect. Many a times, it is a combination of a few factors that caused an effect or consequence to happen. I have to then be further more meticulous in how I separate the main factors, underlying factors, contributing factors, etc.

(Student A)

I have learnt that root factor led to the build-up of the supporting

factors ultimately leading to the issue.

(Student C)

However, although some of their comments were insightful and showed what they professed in their apparent understanding of the way causality operates, this did not always translate into their actual essays, which did not match their professed understanding of causality.

What can be said about the quality of students' writing?

It would be premature to make sweeping claims on the quality of students' writing based on the three weeks of the first phase of intervention. The following observations regarding the quality of students' writing are necessarily tentative.

In response to the question: "*To what extent was conflicting ideologies the main cause for the origin and development of the Cold War?*" only one out of the three students, Student A, demonstrated some inkling about the relative hierarchy and importance of factors in bringing about the onset of the Cold War. Nonetheless, the argument was not very sophisticated, as the student had not considered the degree of importance these factors may play in contributing to the development of the Cold War. For example, whether distrust and suspicion were more or less important than the conflicting ideologies that set the stage for the start of the Cold War was not clearly elucidated. Nevertheless, the student had begun to use some linguistic tools in explaining causation (bold words mine emphasis):

Conflicting ideology contributed significantly to the cold war's origin and development. The differences in

*ideology was the **root problem** that paved the way to conflicts in each countries... However, there were other factors such as suspicion and distrust that built up over time within the superpowers and the difference post war attitudes after world war 2 that **contributed greatly** to the development of the cold war....*

In contrast, Student B had shown little improvement since the pre-intervention essay. This can be seen in an argument that the student made:

The superpower rivalry between the USA and Soviet Union is one of the other factors. The USA and Soviet Union competed for influence over other countries. This was seen in the Berlin Blockade when Stalin imposed a blockade into West Berlin to... However, the USA responded with Berlin Airlift ... However, the actions that Stalin and the USA did were seen as forms of confrontation and further worsened relations. This thus contributed to the development of the extreme state of tension between USA and Soviet Union.

The same issues were still present as the student had merely described the respective actions of the USA and the USSR without explaining **how** these constituted “forms of confrontation” that could have “worsened relations”. In this regard, the student seemed to have moved to Level 2 of Lee and Shemilt (2009)’s model of progression where she seemed to be discussing causes but was actually construing them as “a species of especially potent events able to make other things happen” (p. 44).

Two weeks after the end of the first phase of the intervention, the students sat for their timed writing test focused

on the question: “***The main reason why the Japanese lost the war in Asia-Pacific was because of US military might.***’ ***How far do you agree with this statement?***”

One of the students, Student C, showed some ability in producing a sustained argument regarding the various factors in discussing the reasons for Japanese defeat during the Second World War. The student explained:

*Finally, the last reason why Japan lost the war in Asia-Pacific was because of the over-extended Japanese empire....However, a small country like Japan... Her scarce resources were overstretched, along with the fact that she had to fuel her war machine for the ongoing war. It was **only a matter of time before her defeat was inevitable** as her resources burnt and died out quickly, leaving Japan with a crippled economy that could not sustain her war machine. With the inability to fight back, it was eventual that Japan would lose the Asia-Pacific war.... Thus, Japan’s defeat could not be avoided... (emphasis mine).*

Though not very sophisticated, what was especially pleasing to note was the student’s ability to analyse what she knew about the interaction between past elements “in bringing about the outcome under consideration” (Chapman and Facey, 2009: 92). In this case, the student demonstrated how the fundamental weakness of Japan as a country with its inherent lack and access to natural resources that was required to sustain her war machinery contributed somewhat significantly to her eventual defeat in the Second World War. She was able to suggest that this had made Japan’s defeat somewhat inevitable, especially in the closing

months of the Second World War.

A brief analysis of the students' essays may suggest that while a few students showed some measure of progress others may have stagnated. Two important weaknesses that students continued to demonstrate were their inability to harness in-depth knowledge within context for effective causal explanation (Chapman and Facey, 2009) and their inconsistent use of the "language of causation" (Woodcock 2005; Woodcock, 2011). Yet, there were indications to suggest that students' performance can be improved if they were to continually be given opportunities to apply their understanding of causality in the writing of their essays. If such a strategy were to continue in an extended manner, I believe that these students would be able to confidently explain the relative importance and hierarchy of factors in their essays by the time they sit for their final examinations.

Conclusion

This small-scale study was intended to bridge the theory-practice gap by drawing upon aspects of current research on causality that can be meaningfully incorporated for teaching history in the classrooms. Its main aim was to develop a helpful intervention that teachers can use to support their students' understanding of causation in history. The design of the intervention had taken into consideration two important notions related to students' ideas: first, that students tended to have simplistic notions about the consequences of human agency, and second, that students are likely to view causal factors as acting independently of each other instead of them being a complex web of inter-related causes, events and processes. The primary strategy was through creating a series of

lessons that provided students with a clear understanding of causation, and one that would enable them to answer a causation question with clarity, confidence and clear conceptual understanding. Nevertheless, helping students to understand and apply causal reasoning skills to their essay writing remained a challenging task. From this brief intervention, it revealed the disparity between my original hopeful intention that this intervention would have some major impact on students' thinking, with the actual reality of a relative lack of progress in students' understanding. Nevertheless, I felt that this intervention held promise when seen as a continuing journey in refining strategies to help students grapple with causal reasoning both at the conceptual and at the practical level.

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