Different Approaches to teaching Civilization

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Abstract:

The present work is an attempt to examine a number of different approaches to teaching civilisation and more in particular the teaching of the historical aspects of the different civilisations mainly the British and American ones taught to our university students. It also stresses on what to teach exactly in order to facilitate the learning process or the acquisition of the various historical information. Teachers, indeed, have to emphasize not only on how to teach the historical events but on what to teach or what their students really need to learn in order to make their teaching meaningful. For instance, history textbooks, core concepts, questions, maps... etc should be the focal point of our teaching in order to enhance learning.

Key-words: civilisation, teaching, approaches, historical events, strategies, multimedia.

Introduction: Educators have proposed a number of different approaches to teaching historical events. Along the course of the 20th century, they distinguished between two major teaching philosophies known as the traditional and progressive philosophies of education. The advocates of the progressive approach stated that the acquisition of factual historical knowledge was not as important as they said: **"learning by doing".** By this, they meant that the schooling for the children should be more practical and readily applicable to the work place. [1] Their debate over this issue, indeed, made them differentiate between what they called: Coverage and Postholing (in other terms between Breadth and Depth) and between Memorization and Analysis.

1/ Postholing vs. Coverage (Breadth vs. Depth):

Postholing means an in-depth study or an examination of selected historical events. This method is often in contrast with the traditional teaching method (ie: coverage, also known as the traditional chronological method) that tries to give the students a broad overview of historical knowledge using the textbooks. Some educators ,in fact, argued that the sheer volume of history knowledge makes it virtually impossible to provide the students with a coherent overview of history , so that teachers should focus instead on in-depth investigations of individual historical episodes , a strategy known as postholing.[2]

2/ Memorization vs. Analysis:

Memorization means to ask students to memorize long lists of facts, dates and names. This strategy was of little importance for certain educators, who argued that the students might rapidly forget what they memorize. So, as a best solution to the problem, they claimed that teachers should engage their learners into analysis activities, the fact which enable them to develop the "historical habits of mind" [3], thereby allowing them to analyze important issues they will face in the future. So, from these opposed points of view would it be better for us to follow the methods of the traditionalists and their ideas about transmitting factual knowledge focusing on textbooks, or should we adopt the methods of those who opposed them, the progressive educators with their notions about learning by doing postholing and analysis? For certain teachers to find a balance between the two strategies is the best answer. Our task is, then, to help our students acquire both a coherent understanding of history and the "habits of mind" that can help them to use this understanding. These functions are, therefore, complimentary not contradictory. [4]

But the best question to ask here is that shall we consider the methods previously discussed above as effective teaching methods in today's technologically advanced society. As we know, educators nowadays, work hard to improve these instructional teaching methods. For the students of today have been raised in a society that is strongly dependent on computers, television, video games and most recently the internet; they come to realize that the ancient or the traditional methods are no longer able to provide the students with an educational foundation which is strong enough to resist the pressures of such a technologically dependent society. This is, indeed, the crucial reason which made some of them urge for the use of new pathways that integrate technology in classroom teaching. As stated by Weinraub:

> *"If classroom teaching methodology continues to follow the traditional pathway , we are likely to see a continued decline in the academic progress of our children, because the inherent-technology based learning styles of today's student diverge from the out-of- date teaching styles of the instructors".* [5]

Most educators, now, aim to develop a classroom atmosphere that will create a partnership between students, teachers, and technology that will build on student curiosity and creativity; emphasize quality of understanding rather than quantity of information and to expose students to concepts in a variety of contexts. [6] The integration of multimedia technology ,for instance, has given the teachers the possibility of providing students with material that seems to improve student attitudes, motivation, understanding and responsibility for one's own learning . In general, multimedia means the use of divers resources in order to obtain information about a

particular topic. But the use of multi-media as it relates to technology has somewhat a more computer-related application. Today, it is related to different hypermedia technologies consisting of networks of related text, graphics, audio-files and video-clips through which users navigate utilizing search strategies. This fact will not only facilitate the students' learning process but it will put them into more control of the process .[7] (Mc Grath and Cumara natungue ,1997; Bracey ,1996; Liao,1998.) .Students are also becoming more involved in the learning process by exploring multimedia such as CD-ROM based textbooks, tutorial and laboratory experiments as well as a divers arena of internet –based telecommunications and on-line experiments and research .[8]

3/The Advantages of Using Multimedia Technology in the Classroom (computers, the internet and networks in the classroom):

As noted before, there is a strong relationship between multimedia and learning. It was understood that the use of multimedia with its wide variety of hypermedia technologies in classroom teaching has a positive effects on the student's involvement in the learning process. Furthermore, it was proved that the use of computers as instructional tools had advantages on student's achievements across different grade levels. For example, a study made by Khalili and Shashaani (1994) who utilized 36 independent studies on the effectiveness of computer applications on academic achievement from elementary school to college indicates that hypermedia instruction had a positive result on students' achievement over traditional instruction [9]. This means that there is a strong relationship between the integration of multimedia technology in education and students' academic success. It was also showed that students' perceptions and attention spans during lectures were all significantly improved, when the multimedia presentation was utilized [10].

Another research found it imperative to implement multimedia into classroom activities .Vacca and Vacca, indeed, explain the basic concepts behind such an integration [11]. The latter as they described will develop:

3.1-Interactivity: the students are capable of manipulating texts, and text is responsive to students' interest, purposes and needs.
3.2-Communication: telecommunication networks enhance electronic text interaction with others throughout the world.
3.3-Information search and retrieval: a wide range of information resources and search capabilities enhance student research and information gathering. Students, indeed, are helped to realize research projects. Not only can they get a good start on doing library research, but they can visit archives, museums, exhibits, video collections, libraries…etc. Students can also use online resources to get current materials and articles for projects.
3.4-Multimedia environments: images, sound and text, and video are highly

engaging and extend students' understanding.

The utilization of multimedia technology might also develop students' motivation. Indeed, students working with hands-on interaction with sound files, videodiscs or CD ROMs…etc might be interested and eager to share their new discoveries with others. Learners can also easily share work in different group configurations from the whole class looking at one paper or project, to small groups, to partners-all in one class period without producing multiple hands copy drafts. They can extend group activities beyond classroom walls (if published on internet, students can read and do work at any time in any campus, computer lab or at home). Whole class projects can also be completed and revised many times without the cost and waste of hard copies. In addition, teachers as well as students are given the ability to connect to places all over the world by using the Internet. They can take advantage of Electronic Mail systems that put them into contact with experts in different fields or with other students who may be working on similar classroom projects. The Internet can also help students to publish for a wider audience. Their publications can be read by people from around the world. It can also help students to answer their own questions as to develop their problem solving expertise.

4/What to teach :

Every teacher has to focus not only on how to teach the historical events but on what to teach or what his or her students really need to learn in order to make his or her teaching meaningful. There are four major teaching strategies that a teacher has to use in order to enhance learning. They are summarized as follow:

4.1- Meaning: meaning would always be the starting point of our teaching or the basis of what we teach to students. Teachers, in fact, are encouraged to begin by identifying big ideas or **"essential understandings"** that have **"enduring value beyond the classroom"**. [12] Then, they can work backward to develop the assessments, lessons and materials that will effectively convey such meaningful understandings to the students. According to William McNeill, one of the contemporary world history writers, education might become irrelevant unless we **"find something worth teaching…something all educated persons should know, something every active citizen ought to be familiar with in order to conduct his life well and perform his public duties effectively"**. [13] Thus, meaning should be the focal point of our teaching. These are examples of meaningful understandings we might wish our students to gain from an historical education. In order to understand how the world behave students have to understand:
    -the nature of democracy
    -conservative versus liberal tendencies
    -how did European come to dominate the modern world…etc

4.2- Conceptual Frameworks: Cognitive research has emphasized on our need for certain conceptual frameworks (also known as mental structures, cognitive frameworks, core concepts, mental models, scaffolding, schemas or big ideas) in order to help us connect and organize knowledge so that learning can become meaningful and memorable. The students need such frameworks in order to make a sense of history, to give it meaning and to make it usable. There are several types of conceptual frameworks which have important roles to play in teaching historical events:

4.2.1- Themes: history educators often organize their classroom activities around central themes or concepts called thematic units. The idea behind these thematic units is to move away from core text dependent instruction and to allow students the opportunity to explore a wide range of divers material in pursuit of answers to questions that intrigue them about a particular subject. As stated by Bradley Commission of History: ***"to develop judgment and perspective, historical study must often focus upon broad, significant themes and questions, rather short-lived memorization of facts without context".*** [14] Through this way of instruction, students are often required to research and discover information on their own or in groups. Initially, teachers provide background information in order to spark students' interest and to give them important insight into a particular subject so that they will begin thinking about the topic and start forming opinions and asking questions.

The study of any theme which is done across several historical periods and geographic areas may offer us a useful insight on how humans generally behave and how the world generally works. Cultural diffusion is an example of one such recurring theme; when two cultures meet in war or peace, both cultures learn from one another and are forever changed by the encounter. The Bradley Commission, which found that the study of themes being indispensable, proposed six vital themes, which serve as a framework for understanding the human behavior and how the world functions. [15] These are summarized as follow:

A.   Diffusion:- peaceful contacts: involves migration, teaching, trade, communications…etc
        -hostile contacts: involves warfare, conquest, enslavement…etc.

B. Invention: involves language, learning, planning-ahead, natural resources, technology, religion, art, government, law, philosophy, science.

C. Organization: involves geography, regions, language, learning, planning-ahead, job specialization, waterways, irrigation systems, roads and other public works, trade, social hierarchies, government, civilization, tribes, nation-building, empire-building, communications, law, organized religions, armies and other institutions.

D.   Freedom: involves revolt, democracy, suffrage, liberalism, nationalism, independence movements.

E. Disintegration: involves warfare, conquest, disease, cultural and institutional rigidity, civil unrest and the decline of organizational structures including governments, countries, empires, cultures and civilization.

F. Power: involves greed, war, oppression, slavery, servitude, ethnic conflict, racism,

gender, nationalism, imperialism, empire-building.

4.2.2- Questions: As examined before, teachers are asked to build their teaching around essential or meaningful understandings. Questions are problematic issues that could be used as doorways to enhance such understandings because without questions teaching can fall into: *"superficial and purposeless coverage…Important ideas must be questioned and verified if they are to be understood"* [16]

4.2.3- Timelines: a timeline is a conceptual framework that presents a chronological summary of history in visual form. The British educator Denis Shemilt found it necessary for students to acquire a basic chronology that embraces the whole past and which is presented in terms of significant phases of human history. [17]

4.2.4- Maps: these are another conceptual framework of the visual variety. They can provide the spatial orientations that students should have in order to understand the workings of history and the influence of geography. Maps are, therefore, indispensable for comprehending the spatial dimension.

4.2.5- Graphic Organizers: these are another type of conceptual framework that presents information in visual form. There are different types of graphic organizers such as: a flow chart, timelines, diagrams that show differences and similarities between related phenomena…etc

4.3- A Chronological Narrative:

It means the textbook. History textbooks are one type of historical narrative, which may describe a single event or tell us the story of a larger span of time. It is the job of historians to write the narratives. Indeed, they take and collect a set of information from different sources, shape it and give it meaning. A world history textbook, for example, is a chronological historical narrative that tries to give us a broad overview of history typically beginning with the emergence of humans or the advent of civilization and ending at the present time. But, though certain educators found it necessary to use the textbooks for they have a key role to play in history education, others preferred to abandon them. As stated by those who complained against textbooks, the latter are: *"badly written, factually sloppy or supremely boring"* [18] They are also *"so packed with facts, names and details that the real point of the lesson is often obscured"* [19] They are often overstuffed with facts, distracting features and irrelevant graphics and they are rarely organized to clarify large themes and questions. [20] Furthermore, the high school teacher Alfie Kohn writes that textbooks *"invariably include a little bit of everything and a thoughtful treatment of nothing. It can safely be said that any course consisting mostly of reading a textbook , chapter by chapter, is a course worth avoiding"* [21]

In contrary, for those who found it necessary to use textbooks, the latter provide students with a framework within which to place the particular questions, topics,

episodes and personalities that teachers choose to stress. They serve as a detailed timeline to carry with them. It guards against the disorientation and loss of continuity that can arise from over—use of post holing and unconnected lesson units. [22] It is also noted that any historical study should cultivate the perspective arising from a chronological view of the past down to the present day. [23] In our view, teachers need to focus on historical narratives, which have always been indispensable. In fact, in the absence of an historical overview, our students can not have the opportunity to see how the themes can develop over time and to encounter them in various contexts. We might also create large gaps. Chronology, indeed, provides the mental scaffolding for organizing historical thought. [24]

4.4- Thinking Strategies:

These are a set of analytic skills that students use to understand complex subjects and make sense of incomplete or conflicting historical information. The use of these strategies involves looking at events in a systematic way meant to give learners practice in making sense of complex issues. A topic in fact, is broken down into its component parts in an effort   to better understand the whole. This analysis may be followed by synthesis (a trial to develop a useful overview of the material) and evaluation of the knowledge. Nowadays, educators focus on three traditional approaches to thinking strategies all of which seem helpful to analyze historical events and to understand human behavior. They are summarized as follow:

A-   Comparing and contrasting cultures.
B-   Continuity and change overtime.
C-   Cause and effect relationships.

In this context, Peter, N. Stearns stated:

> *"knowing how to compare and access change is relevant to working at a host of jobs in addition to developing a broader civic competence… Assessing change and causation, comparing different social patterns, is part of understanding how people behave, and this is relevant, even crucial, even in the highest-tech environments…etc"* [25]

From the quotation, we can deduce that comparison is very important in the teaching of historical events. It was considered as an essential world history tool. As noted by Robert B.Bain, a high school history teacher: *"it may be the most widely used demonstration of higher-level thinking in history courses".* [26] It can be made across time, across cultures or across both time and cultures. Bain also said that comparative history has divers objectives:

> *" It can assist the learners to locate significance in an event, help identify the common in the event that may be generalized in the other situations, help in uncovering the less obvious or hidden aspects of a*

situation that deserve attention, and, according to Bain, comparison does, in fact, stimulate higher order thinking skills [27].

Historical causation is also crucial for a better analysis of events. It was found that teachers have to emphasize on developing exercises specifically of causation. Canal Furay and Michael J.Salevouris, in their book, the Methods and Skills of History, focus on the multiple nature of historical causation. They urged that learners should examine a number of causal factors including the ideas, customs and practices of participants, the actions of organized groups and individuals, existing technological and economic conditions, and the role played by contingency-the unforeseen and unexpected events that influence historical out comes. [28]

4.5/ Teaching Activities:

The teaching activities are those exercises which are intended to enhance students' understandings. Traditionally, teachers spent most of their time in teaching activities that focused on learning factual knowledge or information such as: key points, notes/quiz and written narrative, study questions, classroom discussion …etc Recently, teachers tend to include another type of activities which are more problematic and analytical such as: historical analysis exercises, simulations (role playing), research, reading primary source documents, watching-films, staging plays, preparing essays and reports…etc

In our view, teachers have to choose activities that can clarify the meaningful understandings they wish to convey to their students. I think that both types of teaching activities have a key role to play. The traditional ones, for example, might supply us with basic information or a knowledge foundation that can be used and treated in greater depth through the recent activities.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that a change in methods of teaching and learning has become necessary in today's technologically advanced society. Reforms, indeed, are needed at least to meet the challenges of the 21st century .Though, the possibilities to use hypermedia technologies in teaching history or civilization are poor and strictly limited in our universities, we urge for the use of computers to improve our student's attitudes, motivations and understandings. In the world of computers, in fact, we need to provide our students with different ways of learning and with the use of the multimedia technology, our students would surely be given divers chances to learn. This integration of technology will and without doubt offer us a quick access to information that can interest both of teachers and students. But, we think that before we work for integrating multimedia, it is necessary for us to know how to implement it in our classroom. It is sure that the teaching strategies and techniques vary from teacher to teacher but it should be realized that proper teacher and student training is crucial to guarantee the success in our classroom. So, we haven't to speak about the effectiveness of the use of computers and multimedia without having clear information about our teachers' training and interest in computers, and also our students'

background and attitudes towards computers and multimedia technology. It is, therefore, primary to focus on the need for computer-literacy among both of them.

Notes :

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