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“Blips of Meaning”: The Transformation of Reader and History Text

Grace Loh

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ABSTRACT

The study focused on the interpretations of eight “good” or effective Secondary One teachers. It suggests that the teachers interpreted the “text” (consisting of 12 elements) on the basis of their practical knowledge. The teachers tended to describe the literal meaning of the content. This, however, is a rather restricted form of interpretation which ignores the role of both the reader and the plurality of meanings in the message(s) of

the text. To be receptive to the text, the teachers need to reflect on their often taken-for-granted knowledge and practices. The repertory grid was used to elicit such tacit knowledge. Like a mirror, the grid reflected to the teacher his or her own frame of reference for his or her consideration. This is a vital first step in the transformation of both the teacher and his or her interpretation of the text.

Theoretical Background

‘Tis the good reader that makes the good book.’

Emerson

The Objectivist Viewpoint

In relation to the History text, Emerson’s contention would not be supported by objectivists like Hempel (cited in Reagan and Stewart, 1978), for example, who argued that the focus of attention should be shifted from the reader to the text in order to increase the “scientific rigour” of the study of the subject. He suggested further that the reader’s role was not to interpret but rather to describe the content of the text. From such descriptions, regularities could be identified and general laws could then be obtained.

The Subjectivist Viewpoint

While objectivists discount the significance of the reader’s interpretation, subjectivists like Collingwood have strongly supported Emerson’s emphasis on the active role of the reader. Collingwood (1946) argued that the reader should be personally involved in the interpretation of the subject matter. He even suggested that it was only in the present thoughts of the reader that the past thoughts, which had been embedded in the History text, could be reactivated. Thus the reader’s crucial role was to “rethink” the past as she/he read the text.

The Hermeneutic Tradition

Scholars working in the hermeneutic tradition have sought to resolve this “either — or” con-

flict between the objectivist and the subjectivist positions. German scholars like Heidegger, Gadamer, Habermas and Arendt, and French scholars like Ricoeur suggested that it is not just the good reader who "makes" the book but it is also the good book that "makes" the reader. Each party so contributes to each other's development that Ricoeur (cited in Ihde, 1974, p. 16) recommended that the "distance between the past cultural epoch to which the text belongs and the interpreter himself" must be overcome.

To reconcile the "horizons" of the reader and the text, Gadamer suggested that the reader engage in an open dialogue with the text. In order to converse with the content, the reader must first be aware of his or her own prejudices and biases. As these taken-for-granted notions colour his or her subsequent readings, they must be examined. After becoming more aware of the frame of reference he or she uses to make sense of the subject matter, the reader must also remain "open" enough to revise his or her standpoint in the "face of unfolding textual meaning" (Bleicher, 1980, p. 122). Such encounters with the text can be productive since they may reveal to the reader which of his or her "prejudices are blind and which are enabling" (Bernstein, 1983, p. 128).

As the reader's perspective changes, so too do the messages contained in the text. As Bernstein (1983, p. 139) further commented, "what the things themselves" say will be different in the light of our changing horizons and the different questions that we learn to ask." The answers to the reader's "why" questions help to explicate the meaning(s) of the text.

Ihde (1974) and Ricoeur (cited in Reagan and Stewart, 1978, p. 148) pointed out that the reader could better understand the world of the text if she/he did not focus solely on the literal meanings of its message(s). The reader should try instead both to decipher the latent meanings and to perceive possibly multiple meanings in the language of the text itself. A plurality of meanings could enlarge the horizons of the text and introduce new and possible worlds to the reader.

In interpreting the text, the reader must also attempt to proceed from an analysis of the

whole to the part. By constructing a framework to link the discrete pieces of information, the reader would be able to make more sense of the subject. Thus, through their dyadic conversations with each other, both the reader and the text may be transformed and extended. Both the reader and the text may be remade.

Expert and Novice Readers

Various researchers have suggested that some readers were more able to engage in fruitful dialogues than others. This was because as expert readers they were competent in a number of ways: i.e, they were more familiar with the language and subject matter of the text (Larkin, McDermott, Simon & Simon, 1980): they could encode information and perceive patterns (Chase & Simon, 1973: Chi, Feltovich and Glaser, 1981): and they used analogies, metaphors and concepts to help structure unfamiliar content (Novak and Gowin, 1984: Denicolo, 1983). Since researchers have noted important differences in the quality of the dialogue between expert and novice readers and the text, it is important to "eavesdrop" on the private conversations which expert Secondary One History teachers, for example, have with the History text. From such access, information may be obtained to help other novice readers construe the text more effectively.

Benefits of a Self-examination

However, it is not only the novices who can gain from the information gleaned from such conversations. Even the experts themselves would benefit from attempts to elicit their implicit assumptions and "prejudices". As reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983), they could use the interruptions to their taken-for-granted flow of experiences with the text to examine whether or not their frame of reference was sufficiently adequate to meet the changes and uncertainties, not only in the historical world but also in that of the classroom. Schutz and Luckmann (1973, p. 8) also argued for alerting practitioners to when "a novel experience does not fit into what has up until now been taken as the taken-for-granted valid reference schema".

Hunt (1987, p. 34) suggested that, by verbalizing unexpressed ideas and by revealing the concealed, practitioners also come to realize that they "own" the ideas and that this sense of ownership could "increase [their] own agency and control, which creates more choices". Thus practitioners would be afforded opportunities to periodically "spring clean" their pedagogy and discard familiar practices which have become dated, losing the ability to solve new problems. Buchmann (1987, p. 162) noted that, by not blindly following the same practices, the teachers could then escape a cramped existence as "tadpoles" living in the rather restricted environment of the "folkways of teaching". In such a limited environment, the watchword is constancy and lack of change.

Kelly's Constructive Alternativism

Kelly (1955) also recommended the scrutiny of readers' conversations with text. He reminded researchers that, if they wanted to know how people thought, they should ask them and they might tell the researchers! His fundamental postulate depicted individuals as making sense of their world by using personal constructs. In Kellyian terms these constructs provide "transparent templates" or pairs of spectacles which enable a person to "see" the world "in a way in which some things are construed as being alike and yet different from others" (Kelly, 1963, p. 105). Constructs help teachers to anticipate events and to cope with changes. According to Kelly (1963), each construct is bipolar in nature and similar constructs are grouped together in hierarchical networks with the superordinate constructs subsuming the others. To appreciate the particular view afforded by any construct system its features need to be examined.

Kelly's description of how individuals actively interpret information provided the present conceptual framework within which the expert History teacher's construction of the History text was studied. The repertory grid was used to explore the History teacher's constructs or tacit knowledge. It was used previously by Diamond (1979, 1985, 1986) to determine how individuals like midwives, teachers and postgraduate students construed

their courses or their practices. These procedures are followed in the present study.

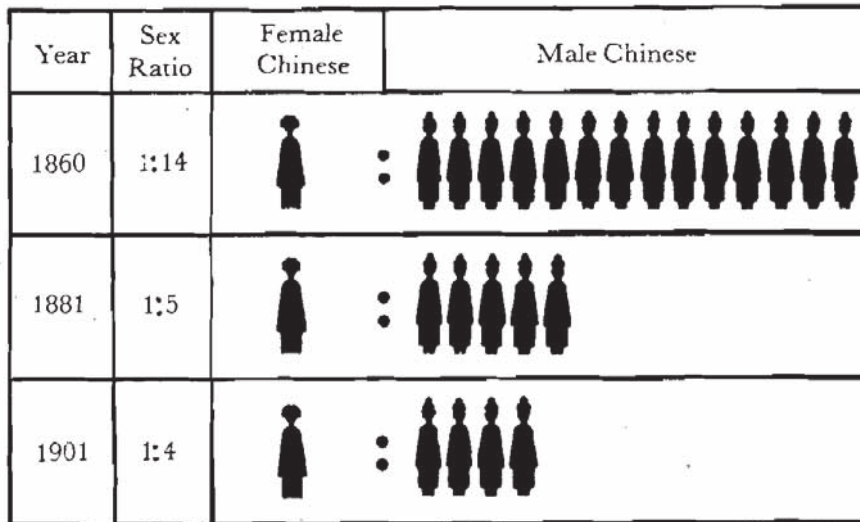
Procedures

To determine how expert Secondary One History teachers construed the text, a Specialist Inspector (History) from the Ministry of Education and an officer from the History Project Team from the Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore were asked to identify "good" or effective Lower Secondary History teachers. Eight such teachers were identified. Although the teachers differed in terms of the length of their teaching experience, they were similar in that they were judged to have a positive attitude towards the subject and their students. Not only were the teachers clearly familiar with the subject matter, but they were also very receptive to new ideas and methodologies.

The major aim of this present study was to examine the assumptions, prejudices and procedures which the teachers used to interpret text. To elicit these experts' tacit understandings of historical content, each was asked to complete a grid elicited in a one-to-one interview with one of the researchers. The grid sought to explore the topic or area of discourse relating to Singapore's early growth. Accordingly, a list of 12 titles (or elements) was devised to include: (1) *Population growth*, (2) *Division of town*, (3) *Temenggong's village*, (4) *Population growth of Indians*, (5) *Population growth of Chinese*, (6) *Javanese family*, (7) *Singapore in the 1820's*, (8) *Singapore in the 1850's*, (9) *Coolies clearing the jungle*, (10) *Europeans*, (11) *Chinese and* (12) *Babas*. Each title provided the caption for either a photograph, illustration, graph or map which had been reproduced from the Secondary One History textbook. The prints were mounted on cards and each was labelled to indicate the title or element to which it referred. An example is given in Figure 1.

This sample of elements or historical content was drawn from the History textbook because the purpose of the study was to examine how teachers interpreted materials that they would normally use in the course of their classroom work. Their construction of the meanings em-

Figure 1: E5 (Population growth of Chinese)



E5

The Ratio of Female Chinese to Male Chinese between 1860 and 1901.

bedded in such curricular materials could then be shared with other Secondary One teachers and students.

The captions were taken from the textbook because this also helped in the exploration of the teachers' familiarity with the content which was being presented in a novel manner. In particular, the researchers who made the study were interested in finding out if the expert teachers perceived any thematic patterns in supposedly unrelated content and if they were concerned only with the literal features of the

"text". This could only be shown by their being asked to compare and contrast the elements.

Cards were used for easier handling when the teachers completed the sorting task. Each teacher was asked to consider the first randomly selected triad of elements and then to determine how any two of the elements were similar to each other and how the third was different from the pair. On the first line or row under "construct", the teacher wrote a word or brief description explaining how the two elements were

TABLE 1 REPERTORY GRID FORM: CONSTRUCTION OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

Construct Emergent Pole (1)	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	E7	E8	E9	E10	E11	E12	Construct Implicit Pole (5)
Pictorial	5	1	1	5	5	1	3	3	1	1	1	1	Graphs
Table	1	1	1	1	1	5	1	1	5	5	5	5	Photographs
Maps	1	1	1	1	1	5	1	1	5	5	5	5	Pictures
Asians	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	5	1	1	Europeans
Settlement Pattern	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	5	1	1	Recreation
Development	5	1	1	5	5	5	1	1	1	5	5	5	Different races
Ratio of Chinese Women	5	5	5	5	1	5	5	5	5	5	5	1	Population Growth of Indians
Accommodation	5	1	1	5	5	5	1	1	5	5	1	5	An ethnic group

alike (the construct emergent pole). On the same line under "contrast", the teacher wrote how the third element differed from the other two (the construct implicit pole). On the second line, the teacher then considered a different set of three elements and determined again how any two were alike and how the third was different. This procedure was followed for the subsequent triads until a total of eight constructs was elicited.

Finally, the teacher was asked to rate all 12 elements, i.e. the illustrations, photographs, maps and graphs, on a 1 to 5 scale for each of the eight constructs. A rating of 1 or 2 was used to indicate that an element was closer in meaning to the emergent construct pole and a rating of 4 or 5 meant that another element was closer to the implicit construct pole. A rating of 3 meant that an element was either in between the two poles or that the respondent was unsure as to its ability to be described by the particular construct. As an example, one teacher's raw grid is presented in Table 1 which shows that, for the first sort, the teacher considered that E2 and E3 were similar in that they referred to pictures. However, E1 was different because it was a graph. Her first elicited construct was therefore formed as a way of perceiving the two elements (E2 and E3) as similar and in contrast to the third (E1). In this example, she used a concrete, simple construct rather than a particularly historical distinction.

3. Analysis

The teachers were encouraged to examine their completed grids to ensure that the constructs were personally meaningful to them. This validity check was followed by discussions with one of the researchers on the personal meanings latent within their grids. However, as Thomas and Harri-Augstein (1985, p. 165) noted:

talkback through the FOCUSed grid . . . provide(s) a very good impression of the general conceptual and perceptual framework within which the client perceives prints of this kind . . . The prints are used to define the perceptual universe of discourse which the participant is being encouraged to explore.

As a cluster analytic procedure, the FOCUS computer program was used to show each teacher the degree of similarity between his or her adjacent elements and constructs. SOCIOGRIDS was then used to analyse the set of grids obtained from the group by extracting a mode grid which represented their shared understandings.

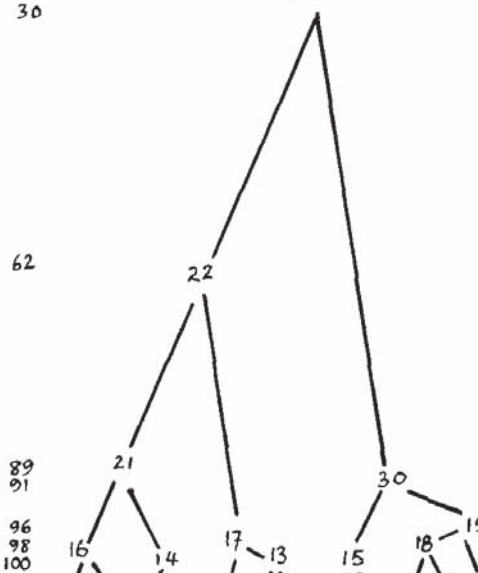
4. Results and Discussion

The extracted and FOCUSed mode grid of the eight History teachers is shown in Figure 2. The element tree consisted of three very tight clusters, with the first comprising elements 2 (*Division of town*), 3 (*Temenggong's village*), 7 (*Singapore in the 1820's*) and 8 (*Singapore in the 1850's*). These elements were highly matched at 98% and 100% respectively and 89% respectively and 98% jointly. The third cluster consisted of the highly matched elements 12 (*Babas*) and 6 (*Javanese family*) and elements 10 (*Europeans*), 9 (*Coolies clearing the jungle*) and 11 (*Chinese*). These were matched at 100%, 98% and 96% respectively and 91% jointly.

The teachers explained that the first cluster of elements was related because it dealt with land use; the second, because it was concerned with population growth; and the third group, because it dealt with types of people. Although the third cluster was only very loosely related at 30% to the other two clusters, the first and second groups were more closely matched (62%). The tripartite division is significant in that it showed that the expert teachers were familiar with only one of the "stories" included in the "text". They confined their interpretation to a description of the literal meanings of the contents of the text, namely, of the 12 elements. This was reflected in the index used to categorise the subject matter, which consisted of three headings, i.e. land use, population growth and types of people. The headings were rather self-evident and could be derived even if only the "surface" features of the text were examined. The index was also so general that it could be used for the classification of material unrelated to the contents of historical texts. Thus, while the subject matter of the text had been rearranged into appropriate cate-

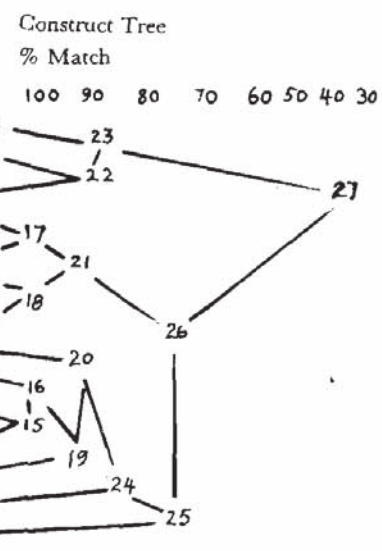
Element Tree
% Match
30

Figure 2: History Teachers' (N=8) FOCUSed Mode Grid of Historical Knowledge



Construct	Emergent Pole	#	2	3	7	8	5	1	4	12	6	10	9	11
Housing	G5C1	14	1	1	2	2	4	5	5	3	3	4	3	2
Location Plan	G3C1	8	1	1	2	2	5	5	5	3	3	3	3	2
Landform	G7C1	9	1	1	2	2	5	5	5	3	3	4	4	4
Geographical	G7C3	11	1	1	1	1	3	3	3	5	5	5	5	5
Map	G1C3	10	1	1	1	1	3	3	3	5	5	5	5	5
Location Map	G3C5	12	1	1	1	1	3	3	3	4	4	5	5	5
Map	G7C5	3	1	1	1	1	3	3	3	4	4	5	5	5
Early Development of Singapore	G3C6	7	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	4	5	5	5
Graphic Representation	G1C5	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	5	5	5	5	5
Table	G2C2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	5	5	5	5	5
Map	G2C3	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	5	5	5	5	5
Population Growth	G5C7	5	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	5	5	5	5	5
Population Growth	G4C2	6	1	2	3	3	1	1	1	5	5	5	5	4
Graph	G7C7	4	4	4	3	3	1	1	1	5	5	5	5	5

Construct	Implicit Pole	#	14	8	9	11	10	12	13	7	3	1	2	5	6	4
Population Growth		14														
Population Graph		8														
Mathematical Representation		9														
Pictorial		11														
Pictorial		10														
Drawing		12														
Drawing		13														
Photograph		7														
Pictorial		3														
Photograph		1														
Pictorial		2														
Types of People		5														
Clothing		6														
Picture		4														



- Chinese
- Coolies clearing the jungle
- Europeans
- Javanese family
- Babas
- Population growth of Indians
- Population growth
- Population growth of Chinese
- Singapore in the 1850's
- Singapore in the 1820's
- Temenggong's village
- Division of town

gories, neither the reader nor the text had been transformed in the process.

The teachers' adherence to Hempel's objectivist account was also shown from an analysis of the construct tree in the FOCUSed Mode Grid. The teachers were seen to have described the subject matter at both the "macro" and "micro" levels. For instance, this group of teachers used two highly related clusters of constructs in describing historical content. At the "macro" level, they consisted of Constructs 1, 2 and 3 (100% match), and Constructs 12 and 13 (100% match). At a more particular "micro" or subordinate level, there was also another cluster of related constructs. It consisted of Constructs 8, 9 and 14 (90% match).

The teachers had thus developed a consensual framework to make sense of the historical subject matter and they were quite systematic in their approach. Firstly, they used superordinate construct(s) like **table**, **map**, **graphic representation** and **location map** to link the diverse facts and to subsume the details within a hierarchical network of related information. Examples of more subordinate constructs include **location plan**, **landforms** and **housing**. The teachers could also use these patterns to integrate new ideas into their existing frameworks.

The teachers, however, again focused on the literal aspects of the elements in forming their constructs. As rather general constructs were formed to describe and group the content items, the constructs were not distinctively "historical". This was not surprising in the light of the interview findings. For instance, the teacher perceived the elements not as historical data but rather as "concrete objects". As one teacher said, she focused on the concrete aspects "because pictures and photographs would be easier for students to understand and not so abstract". The teachers, being "good" in their work, therefore considered the text only in terms of its classroom use.

This was evident in the transmissive emphasis which the teachers gave to the clear presentation of content to students. According to one teacher, it is important to link the information. Thus, he perceived the 12 elements as consisting of an "association of

ideas" and that the researchers were asking him to "classify elements under categories". His categories, which included constructs like **photographs**, were formed because they were precisely the aids which this practitioner used to connect historical "facts" for his students. Another teacher said that as "Geography and History are closely related", she used **location** to categorise the elements. She often used "location" in her teaching to provide herself and her students with the setting within which the historical events occurred. Thus, it is evident that teachers interpreted and even perhaps limited the "text" on the basis of their "practical knowledge" (Elbaz, 1981). However, this restricted interpretation could be expanded if the teachers acted on Collingwood's suggestion as to the need to rethink the past; e.g., the elements could be categorised from the perspective of the local inhabitants as well as from the viewpoints of the Asian immigrants and of the Europeans. Each party could interpret the changes in early Singapore differently.

The teachers could also have followed the hermeneutic tradition by attending to the hidden, as well as to the plurality of meanings in the messages of the text. For instance, the teachers could have organised the elements by using a superordinate construct like **frontier society** with subordinate constructs like **pioneers**, **living conditions** and **working conditions**. Another interpretative alternative could be to organise the content on the basis of CHALLENGES and RESPONSES. Subordinate constructs might then include LIMITATION (of natural and human resources) and MAXIMISATION (of the same resources as well as imports).

Conclusion

Teachers can be helped to realise that they do not need to interpret history solely in terms of classroom exigencies. They can benefit from reflecting on their practice and its theoretical underpinnings. In turn, they can learn to become more open to the possibility that multiple meanings are embedded in the text, waiting to be "read out". Dialogue between the teacher-reader and the text helps remove

conceptual blinkers and both become transformed. Kelly (1963, p. 145) thus described the history teacher's expanding capacity:

When a person scans the events with which he is surrounded he "lights up" certain dichotomies in his construct system. Thus construct systems can be considered as a kind of scanning pattern which a person continually projects upon his world. As he sweeps back and forth across his perceptual field he picks up blips of meaning. The more adequate his scanning pattern is the more adequate his world becomes. The more in tune it is with the scanning pattern used by others, the more blips of meaning he can pick up from their projections.

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