

‘BUT IT MIGHT NOT JUST BE THEIR POLITICAL VIEWS’: USING JÖRN RÜSEN’S ‘DISCIPLINARY MATRIX’ TO DEVELOP UNDERSTANDINGS OF HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on teaching and learning about historical interpretations and accounts. Jörn Rüsen’s ‘disciplinary matrix’ has been much discussed in research and pedagogic literature in history education. This paper explores how the ‘matrix’ can be used as a tool for exploring and evaluating student thinking about historical interpretations by examining interview data on this issue collected from English 16-19 year-old students. The ‘matrix’ is also used to reflect on pedagogic strategies that aim to develop student thinking. An example of a pedagogic strategy that aimed to develop conceptual dimensions of student thinking is described and evaluated and future directions for research and practice are suggested.

1 INTRODUCTION

The study of historical interpretations is a core element of the history curriculum in England across the age range. One of the key ‘Aims’ of History in our National Curriculum, which identifies what pupils aged 5 to 14 years should be taught, is that pupils should learn to ‘discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed’ (DFE, 2013). Pupils aged 14-16 are to be taught to ‘understand, analyse and evaluate how the past has been interpreted and represented in different ways, using a range of appropriate media’ (OFQAL, 2012, p.5) and pupils in the age range 16-19 years are to be taught to ‘comprehend, analyse and evaluate how the past has been interpreted and represented in different ways, for example in historians’ debates and through a range of media such as paintings, films, reconstructions, museum displays and the internet’ (OFQAL, 2011, p.5). There are inconsistencies in these curriculum

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'But it might not just be their political views'... - Arthur Chapman

statements.² It is clear, nevertheless, that pupils are to learn that representations of the past are plural, rather than singular, and that pupils are to learn about a range of modes of representation. The latter are specified most clearly in the curriculum for 16-19 year-olds where the modes of representation are to include academic modes of representation associated with the discipline of history ('historians' debates') and a wide range of cultural (e.g. 'paintings' and 'museum displays') and popular cultural (e.g. 'films' and 'the internet') modes of representation of the past.

Few historians or history educators could object to these curricular requirements. It is, of course valuable to encourage pupils to reflect on the nature of history – not least because they cannot really be said to have learned history until they have learned how histories are made (ROGERS, 1979). A focus on multiple interpretations of the past is also consistent with trends in academic practice since the 1960s that have led to a broadening of historical studies from an earlier narrow political focus (BOOTH, 2008; MANDLER, 2002), to an interest in popular historical consciousness (LOWENTHAL, 1985; SAMUEL, 1994) and 'memory' (MEGILL, 2007; OLICK, et al, (eds.), 2011).

Although a curricular focus on plural historical interpretations is welcome it is not without its challenges. Studies of children's historical thinking suggest that we need to think carefully about the preconceptions that pupils are likely tacitly hold about how historical knowledge is produced and about what historical interpretations are, since their preconceptions can present a significant barrier to learning (LEE and SHEMILT, 2003 and 2004). Furthermore, pedagogic practices can present barriers to understanding and undermine the insights that we may be wishing to develop. Studies of undergraduate students' thinking about history suggest that didactic pedagogies focused on direct instruction create the perception that history can be straightforwardly known in a definitive account and thus can make the study of multiple interpretations seem pointless (BOOTH, 2005).

In this paper I aim to contribute to our understanding of how we can develop students' thinking about historical interpretation and

² For example, whereas the National Curriculum requires students to learn 'how and why' interpretations 'have been constructed' the curricula for 14-16 and 16-19 year-olds require only that students learn about 'how the past has been interpreted and represented in different ways', inconsistencies have significant implications for pedagogy since to focus on 'how' interpretations have been constructed differently is to engage in a descriptive task, whereas to focus on 'why' differences in interpretation have arisen is to engage in an explanatory task.

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I aim to do so by using Jörn Rüsen's 'disciplinary matrix' as a tool with which to analyse the forms and the limits of history students' thinking. Finally, I will comment briefly on how we might aim to move students' thinking about historical interpretation forward by focusing on an aspect of a pedagogic intervention that has demonstrated some success in achieving this objective.

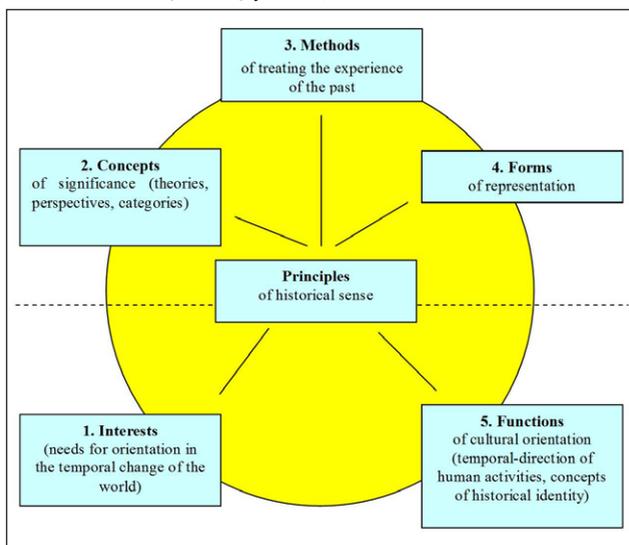
This paper focuses on data relating to 16-19 year-old history students, the age group on which the majority of my practical and empirical work has focused.

JÖRN RÜSEN'S 'DISCIPLINARY MATRIX'

Jörn Rüsen's 'disciplinary matrix' (RÜSEN, 2005, p.132) is much discussed in the literature.³ The 'disciplinary matrix' provides a 'model of historical studies' that aims to think historical practice as a 'cognitive strategy for getting knowledge about the past' but also to show 'how the work of historians is influenced by and related to practical life' (RÜSEN, 2005, p.135). Figure 1 presents and simplifies a recent formulation of the 'matrix'.

FIGURE 1. JÖRN RÜSEN'S 'DISCIPLINARY MATRIX'

(Adapted from RÜSEN, 2005, p. 134)



3 Rüsen's work is discussed in ANKERSMIT, 2002, pp.262-280 and MEGILL, 1994 and its educational implications are explored in CHAPMAN and FACEY, 2004, LEE, 2002, 2004 and 2005; SEIXAS (Ed.) 2004; SEIXAS, 2005; and SEIXAS and CLARK, 2004.

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The items 'above the line' (LEE, 2002) that divides the figure horizontally relate to history as a cognitive strategy and the items 'below the line' to history's relationship to 'practical life' (LEE, 2002; RÜSEN, 2005).

The matrix operates in a clockwise and in a cyclical manner. For Rüsen, history arises from a practical human need ('Interests') to deal with the temporal change (RÜSEN, 2005, p.10) and it answers the *questions* arising from the experience of time and change by providing orientation through narration ('Forms' and 'Functions' in the figure). For Rüsen, disciplinary history is differentiated from other modes of dealing with time through the methodological rationality that it brings to bear on temporal problems (the 'Concepts' and 'Methods' identified in the figure) and through the application of interpersonal norms of argument embodied in academic practice (RÜSEN, 2005, p.134). The numbers in the figure combine the various 'principles' of historical sense making into 'strategies'. 'Interests' and 'Concepts' combine in a 'semantic strategy of symbolization' allowing human activity in time to be imbued with meaning and 'sense' ('1' in the figure), 'Concepts' and 'Methods' combine in a 'cognitive strategy of producing historical knowledge' ('2' in the figure), 'Methods' and 'Forms' combine in an 'aesthetic strategy of historical representation' ('3' in the figure), 'Forms' and 'Functions' combine in a 'rhetorical strategy of offering historical orientation' ('4' in the figure) and 'Functions' and 'Interests' combine in a 'political strategy of collective memory' ('5' in the figure) (RÜSEN, 2005, pp.133-4).

Rüsen's model is a valuable tool for organising reflection on historiography and on accounts of historical practice. It can enable lacunae in particular historiographic positions to be identified, for example, and it can serve as a corrective to constructions of history that privilege practical life 'below the line', modelling history as rhetoric and collective memory to the neglect of cognitive aspects of historical practice. On the other hand, it can also serve as a correctiveto constructions of history that privilege the cognitive, modelling history as disembodied theoretical activity and focusing exclusively 'above the line', neglecting the ways in which all intellectual practice is necessarily embodied in practical contexts.⁴

⁴ The former stance is typical of many postmodernist historiographers (for example, JENKINS, 1991, pp.6-32). The latter stance is, arguably, apparent in the Olympian position that Oakeshott takes on the 'practical past' (OAKESHOTT, 1991 and 1999) and is characterised by Jenkins as 'ownsakism' (JENKINS, 1997).

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Furthermore, as Alan Megill has suggested, the matrix can also serve as a heuristic, for analysing and comparing historical writing, providing 'a reminder of what sorts of metahistorical questions we can and ought to ask when we confront works of history' (MEGILL, 1994, p.58). Metahistorical questions that the matrix can be used to scaffold include the following.

How is this historian, in writing this work, influenced by his or her society and by his or her place within that society? What social agenda does the work implicitly or explicitly attach itself to? What overall vision of history informs the work? What type or types of method does the historian deploy? What forms of representation? (MEGILL, 1994, p.59)

A tool that can be used to think about how philosophers and historians model history can also, perhaps, be applied in the same way to evaluate student thinking about how history works and to assist in the development of pedagogic strategies that aim to build pupil understanding. In both cases, we can use the matrix diagnostically to explore how far students' thinking or pedagogic approaches address the full range of dimensions of historical sense making. We can use the matrix to pose questions at differing levels of specificity. At a general level, for example, we can ask whether teaching and learning about interpretation neglects the conceptual and the methodological by focusing exclusively 'below the line'. At a more specific level, for example, we might focus on considerations 'above the line' and ask if teaching and learning about interpretation pays sufficient regard to history as a narrative practice.

In the remainder of this paper I will endeavour to use the matrix in the ways I have outlined. First, I will use it to explore the strengths and limitations of examples of student thinking drawn from my own research. Second, I will reflect on how we might develop pedagogies to enhance students' understandings of interpretation.

USING RÜSEN'S 'MATRIX' TO EXPLORE STUDENTS' HISTORICAL THINKING

In 2002, as part of my doctoral studies, I conducted a case study of my own students' thinking about historical interpretation

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(CHAPMAN, 2009(a)). Twenty four students in the 16-19 year-old age range completed three pencil and paper tasks that asked them to explain and evaluate competing representations of the past over the course of one academic year. Half the students were then interviewed. Extracts from three of these interviews are presented below. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner: all respondents were asked the same initial questions and follow up questions were then used in ways that varied depending on the students' initial response and that sought to probe and explore their thinking. Data relating to one question – that asked students to explain why differences in historical interpretation arise – are explored below.

These students had not been taught a great deal about the methodology of historical interpretation because the course that they were following did not require a depth focus on this issue. They had significant experience of using historical source materials in class, they had conducted their own independent research projects and were required to complete an examination in which there would be asked to evaluate historical interpretations. There was no requirement for them to be able to explain why differing interpretations arose, however, and they had not been explicitly taught about this issue in class, where their learning had focused on the comparison and evaluation of interpretations.

I do not intend to posit any general conclusions about how students think on the basis of the examples explored in this paper – indeed, it would be absurd to do so, since my sample is small and, in any case, there is no reason to think that my students are representative of any wider group. I do intend to show how Rösen's 'matrix' might be used diagnostically by educators to think about how their students think and, therefore, about how they are being taught.

RUTH

Ruth's responses to questions designed to explore her ideas about why historians produce differing interpretations of the past are reproduced in Figure 2 below.⁵

5 All student names in the remainder of this article are pseudonyms. Text in the interview extracts has been modified to remove pauses and repetitions.

FIGURE 2. INTERVIEW EXTRACT 1: RUTH

Interviewer: Why do historians disagree about things?

Ruth: I think it's a lot to do with like individual opinions. People have different opinions with politics, some are left wing some are right wing, and I think people view things in the way they want to see it. The historian will look at things like events in the way they perceive it and quite often they can distort the information or get what they want from the information to suit their way of thinking.

Interviewer: Right, so political views shape how they see the past?

Ruth: Yes but it might not just be their political views, I mean for example their upbringing. It shapes someone. Some people are quite negative some are quite positive and they are going to look on a situation in light of their past experiences and the way they see things. So with there being different historians they are all going to have different experiences and different ways to interpret situations and so they are going to see an event in a different way and they are going to see evidence in a different way.

Interviewer: Could you give me an example of how your background or your values might affect how you interpret something?

Ruth: Maybe say corporal punishment or something? If you are brought up not to believe in violence and things like that then you're obviously going to disagree with it but if you're brought up in a way that has had a lot of punishment in it yourself you're going to look at it in a different light...

Interviewer: What about your understanding of the facts? How would that be shaped by your own beliefs?

Ruth: Well quite often evidence is things like letters, speeches things like that and you can look at the way they are saying it. Your experiences are going to influence the way that you understand what this evidence is saying. So for example if it's a speech about weapons. If you disagree with what they were doing, with the weapons for example, then you are going to view it in a different light. The facts don't change. A fact is a fact and if it's true it's always going to stay true but you can always interpret it in different ways.

Interviewer: Could you explain that to me? So two different people could agree about the facts but interpret them in different ways. Could you give me an example?

Ruth: Say someone's been killed and the fact is they are dead, but people could interpret the way they are dead in two very different ways. Someone with a negative attitude or [who is] very suspicious is going to think 'murder' and someone else might just think 'natural death' or suicide or something like that... People have always got their own needs and desires and they are going to want to satisfy that in the way that they examine things. So if they are going to look at a piece of evidence they are not just going to go totally against what they believe and they think they are going to try to make it work towards what they want because it's will satisfy them more.

'But it might not just be their political views'... - Arthur Chapman

Ruth's thinking about why historians might disagree is governed by a number of related ideas and is internally consistent. For Ruth, variations in what historians say about the past are determined, in essence, by historians' identities – by who historians are. For Ruth, individual historians' responses to source materials and past events are shaped by 'needs and desires' arising from their personal identities and by their political values and attitudes which are shaped by individual historians' past experiences and upbringing.

What is most striking, perhaps, about Ruth's account is the absence in it of cognitive considerations or of any sense of history as a discipline. For Ruth, one might say, variation in historical interpretations is a matter of individual psychology rather than of historical theory, concepts or methodology. In terms of the 'matrix' Ruth's thinking, as revealed in this interview extract, appears to operate almost entirely 'below the line'. Historical sense making has no methodological element and is a matter of imposing pre-determined values and attitudes on the record and the events of the past. In so far as historians are understood as operating an interpretive framework it would appear to be almost entirely determined by the historians' personal identities.

PETER

Peter's responses to questions designed to explore his ideas about why historians produce differing interpretations of the past are reproduced in Figure 3 (other page).

Peter's thinking about why historians might disagree resembles Ruth's in a number of key respects. Again, individuality is stressed. Historians are different people, they have different beliefs, shaped by their personal backgrounds, and these beliefs cause them to interpret historical evidence in differing ways. There is a significant contrast between Peter's thinking and Ruth's, however, and there are clear suggestions in Peter's comments, that we need to move 'above the line' in the 'matrix' to make sense of history.

Whereas, for Ruth, historians may disagree because of their attitudes and values, in Peter's account historians give reasons and make arguments and explanations – whereas one historian might conclude that Nazi Germany was not ruled by terror 'because' there were very few Gestapo making rule by terror 'structurally impossible', another historian might use the fact that people were in concentration 'camps' as a reason to conclude that Nazi Germany was ruled by terror.

FIGURE 3. INTERVIEW EXTRACT 2: PETER

Interviewer: Why do historians disagree?

Peter: Because things can be interpreted in different ways. People may have different beliefs and therefore may look at things a different way...

Interviewer: Why does that happen?

Peter: People are different and therefore have different ways of being brought up so they have different opinions. If everyone was the same, if everyone was brought up by the same parents there probably wouldn't be disagreements....

Interviewer: Is there anything specific to history? So Historians like everybody else will have different views?

Peter: Well evidence can be interpreted in different ways, for example the Gestapo in Germany was very short numbered and some people could say they could still terrorise because there's people in camps, but [others would say] well they can't because it's structurally impossible. People have different opinions and will interpret evidence in different ways.

Interviewer: That could be equally true of an economist. Is there anything specific to history that causes historians to disagree?

Peter: Well I guess the sources. I mean the difference between an economist and a historian is that an economist can look at figures and statistics from now. Historians can't really test what they think is true and we can't go and count the number of Gestapo there are in Germany. So a historian has limited evidence. The limited evidence means that you have to take what you can and that causes differences of opinion... Say in Psychology, you may think animals aren't clever or something and you can keep doing tests on them for ever. Eventually you might get a better opinion and people might agree more when they see things but we can't keep doing tests on Germany because it's in the past. You can really keep doing tests on anything in history because it's all in the past and you can't repeat the past now. Well you could if you had a time machine

Interviewer: If we had would there still be disagreements?

Peter: A lot of disagreements would be sorted out. I think it would be useful because we could settle lots of debates over things because you could look back and see from your perspective.

The terminology that both Ruth and Peter use is sometimes identical ('opinion') but it is clear that Peter is thinking in a different way from Ruth. Perhaps we can conclude that Peter has some awareness of the role that 'concepts' play in historical interpretation and that a 'cognitive strategy' is involved in 'producing historical knowledge', even if he does not have the vocabulary with which to articulate this insight clearly.

For Peter, in contrast to Ruth, historical sense making does have methodological elements. On the one hand, as we have seen, he presents

'But it might not just be their political views'... - Arthur Chapman

historians as making arguments (he uses the word 'because'). On the other hand, also, his responses to questions contrast the predicament of historians, who study an absent object (the past), with economists and psychologists who study present objects. The understanding of methodological differences that Peter has appears limited in a number of respects but it is clear that there is some understanding, nevertheless: for Peter, historians have 'limited evidence' and cannot 'really test what they think is true' in a satisfactory way.⁶

STUART

Stuart's responses to questions designed to explore his ideas about why historians produce differing interpretations of the past are reproduced in Figure 4 below.

FIGURE 4. INTERVIEW EXTRACT 3: STUART

Interviewer: I am interested in why historians disagree. Can you give me your thoughts on that?

Stuart: Because they will be looking at many different types of [document]. Some historians will look at some types of document and others will look at different ones and even if they look at the same ones they will interpret them differently because it's the very nature of a document that you can interpret it differently, because different people are looking for different things.

Interviewer: Could you explain that to me? So, basically different documents or the same documents. Why is it inevitable that people interpret them differently? Could you give me some examples of that?

Stuart: There could be bias. So if you are biased towards a certain thing you might look for the positives in something which you might see as overshadowing the negatives, or if you were just looking for different things, if you were looking for more social things, other people might look for more political things in a document then you are going to come up with some differences....

Interviewer: Are there any other factors

Stuart: Political, social pressures, the society you are living in... or is that the same as bias? I don't know you might interpret something differently if there is a different climate of feeling at that time towards something, so if there's an anti-communist feeling you might just be predisposed to that then kind of follow that feeling.

⁶ There is some inconsistency in Peter's thinking, perhaps. If people inevitably have differing opinions and interpret things differently then the 'time machine' solution that he presents to the historians' problem of 'limited evidence' would not be likely to resolve disagreements of interpretation.

'But it might not just be their political views'... - Arthur Chapman

Stuart's response is strikingly different from both Ruth and Peter's responses. Whereas both Ruth and Peter rapidly make reference to historians' individuality and opinions in their interview responses, making reference to historians' upbringing and personal background, this explanation plays very little role in Stuart's answer. He does not foreground historians' identities and although he does make reference to the social context in which historians operate this is the last of the factors that he mentions.

Stuart does make reference to 'bias' – to imposing preconceived political meanings on the past - however, this is not his starting point. He begins and remains focused for much of the time on considerations that operate 'above the line' and that relate to history making as 'a cognitive strategy of producing historical knowledge' (RÜSEN, 2005, p.133). Thus, for Stuart, unlike Ruth and Peter, variations in historical interpretation have methodological explanations. For Stuart, difference is inherent in historical enquiry: historians can ask different questions and different answers naturally follow. Stuart's historians may decide to 'look at' different source materials, and, even if they 'look at' the same 'document' they may be 'looking for different things'. Stuart also recognises, however, that historical enquiry does not take place in a vacuum and considerations 'below the line' play a role in his account. It is not simply a matter of individual 'bias', however: the 'climate of feeling' in the time in which historians work may impact how they think and conduct their research.

CONCLUSION

It is apparent from the discussion of these three cases, first, that Rüsen's 'matrix' can help bring out and clarify important differences in the explanations for variation in historical interpretation that students offer: there are striking differences in these three cases in their relative emphasis on considerations 'above' and 'below the line' and in the degree to which they make references to cognitive and methodological aspects of historical interpretation. It is also apparent that the 'matrix' can draw attention to dimensions of interpretation that do not figure in students' thinking and thus indicate where future teaching

'But it might not just be their political views'... - *Arthur Chapman*

might focus. There is nothing, for example, in any of the three responses to suggest that these students were thinking about historical interpretation in representational terms ('Form' in the 'matrix'). The 'matrix', then, can be used as a tool for assessing how students are learning and also for reflecting on where teachers might focus their teaching.

USING RÜSEN'S 'MATRIX' TO REFLECT ON PEDAGOGY AND PRACTICE

There has been significant pedagogic debate about how to develop understandings of interpretations in England in the last twenty five years and a number of approaches to interpretations have been proposed addressing many of the features of historical interpretation identified by the 'matrix'.⁷

A number of approaches focus, as it were, 'below the line', historicizing interpretations and locating them as texts produced in particular contexts in order to achieve particular effects. We might call this an historicist and a rhetorical approach to accounts.⁸ In addition, Ward (2006) exemplifies an approach that focuses on 'aesthetic' or 'formal' aspects of historical practice by attending closely to historians' representational strategies.

A number of practitioner articles have reported strategies focused on the historical logic of interpretations or, to cite the title of one of these articles, on historians' 'theories and methods' (HAMMOND, 2007): these approaches clearly target cognitive dimensions of historical practice and therefore aim to develop student thinking 'above the line', in Rüsen's terms and to develop students' thinking about 'concepts' and 'methods' (RÜSEN, 2005). As Howells has observed, a focus on historians' questions and methods can focus students on 'genuine historical controversy' and place 'the process of historical research

7 For example, CARD, 2004; BANHAM and HALL, 2003; FORDHAM, 2007; HAMMOND, 2007; HAYDN, et al. 2008; HOWELLS, 2005; McALEAVY, 1993, 2000 and 2003; MASTIN and WALLACE, 2006; MOORE, 2001; PHILLIPS, 2002; SINCLAIR, 2006, WRENN, 2001 and WARD, 2006.

8 The work of McAleavy (1993, 2000 and 2003) is particularly associated with this approach and has been influential in shaping practice (for example, BANHAM and HALL, 2003).

'But it might not just be their political views'... - Arthur Chapman

and evaluation at the heart of... investigation' (2005, p.33). Practitioner work on historical significance also has a similar intention, in the sense that it firmly focuses students' attention on the criteria of significance that are in play when judgments of significance are made, thus foregrounding conceptual aspects of historical meaning making (BRADSHAW, 2006; COUNSELL, 2004; PHILLIPS, 2002).

Although we have good examples of practitioner reports of strategies designed to develop students' understandings there is a lack of systematic research into the effectiveness of strategies that aim to move student thinking on. I will end by briefly commenting on one project that has begun to work in this direction – the History Virtual Academy project that I directed in 2007-9 and 2011 (CHAPMAN, 2009(b), 2011 and 2012; CHAPMAN, et al., 2012). This project grew out of the doctoral research that I have drawn on above and used similar written instruments. In my doctoral research and in the History Virtual Academy project students were asked to answer explanatory and evaluative questions about conflicts of historical interpretation. In the History Virtual Academy project, however, students answered the same questions more than once. They posted an initial answer online, using a discussion board, and then gave and received feedback about these initial posts before redrafting their initial answers and re-posting them online at the end of the exercise. The feedback that the students received during this process came from three sources – from other students, from academic historians and also from a forum moderator. The impact of this feedback on student thinking has been considered elsewhere (CHAPMAN, 2012) and there is not space to duplicate that analysis here. I will focus on one aspect of the feedback that aimed to develop students' thinking about cognitive and conceptual aspects of historical interpretation.

Figure 5 reproduces moderator feedback given to students in the 2008 iteration of the History Virtual Academy. These questions aim to explore how students might be focused on 'cognitive' aspects of historical interpretation ('Concepts' and 'Methods' in the matrix) in practical teaching contexts.

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FIGURE 5. IDEAS FOR THINKING ABOUT WHY INTERPRETATIONS MIGHT DIFFER

(Adapted from CHAPMAN, 2009(b), p.134)

... It is important to read... interpretations very closely and to reflect on both evidence and argument. Here are some questions you might ask to help you do this.

- Are the historians asking the same questions or are they in fact answering different questions about the past? (It is possible to set out with different aims - to set out to describe something in the past, to explain it, to evaluate it and so on.)
- Do the historians examine the same source materials as they pursue their questions about the past?
- Do the historians ask the same questions of their source materials?
- Is there common ground between [the] historians – do they agree on basic facts for example?
- Where exactly does disagreement arise – it might be about some basic facts or it might be that disagreement arises when conclusions are drawn from agreed facts.
- Where different conclusions are drawn from similar facts or sources it may be because the historians disagree about what these things mean. There are many reasons why they might. Consider these possibilities (and others that you can think of!):
 - Do they have differing understandings of the context (the period, the background situation and so on)?
 - Are they defining concepts in different ways (if we disagree about whether a 'revolution' has occurred, for example, it may be because we are using different criteria to define the concept 'revolution')?

Previous analyses of the History Virtual Academy data sets indicate that the project was successful in moving at least some of the students on in their thinking (Chapman, 2012). The following three posts were made by the same student during the course of an online discussion exercise focused on a controversy about a seventeenth century group of English religious radicals called 'the Ranters'. In all three posts the student was considering how it was possible for historians to disagree about this historical group. The first and the last posts redraft an answer to this question. The last post was written after receiving feedback, including the feedback questions outlined in Figure 5.

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FIGURE 6. EXEMPLAR POSTS FROM THE 2008 HISTORY VIRTUAL ACADEMY DATA SETS

The main reason that historians hold different opinions is that whereas the author of text 1 suggests that the Ranterers posed a challenge to society, the author of text 2 denies their very existence. The latter text suggests that their supposed existence was in fact the result of a moral panic. This author holds the opinion that accounts of supposed Ranterism were the result of the political climate of civil unrest during the mid-1600s.

Student A Discussion Board post, March 13th 2008 (excerpt)

[T]he historians draw different conclusions. This difference is primarily based on a disparity in interpretation, not due to a difference in evidence. Indeed, both use the same evidence, such as the Blasphemy Act of 1650, but twist this evidence to suit their argument...

Student A Discussion Board post, March 26th 2008 (excerpt)

[The author of the first text] is willing to believe that references to Ranterers from contemporary sources constitute evidence which substantiates their existence. He takes fragmentations of evidence... as proof they existed.... In comparison, [the author of the second text] ... suggests a movement cannot exist without followers, for which there is no evidence. Furthermore, the difference between the historians' views can be explained because [the author of the second text] suggests writings alone are not adequate to evidence the existence of a group... a group of people existed who 'rantred', but this group does not constitute a movement.

Student A Discussion Board post, 7th April 2008 (excerpt)

Some significant changes are apparent over the course of these posts. The first post fails to explain differences in the approaches that historians had taken to the Ranterers and simply summarises differences between the approaches taken. The second post does explain differences in approach but it does so in terms of intentional author distortion, a notion located 'below the line' in Rösen's terms: here historians are understood as manipulating evidence in a rhetorical manner ('to suit their argument'). Their final post differs from the previous two posts in striking ways. There has been a shift away from subjectivity ('opinion' in post 1) and rhetoric ('twist to suit their argument' in post 2) to probative language and a focus on reasoning ('constitute evidence... proof' in post 3). Student A's final post focused on arguments that the historians advanced and on assumptions that they made in interpreting evidence.

'But it might not just be their political views'... - Arthur Chapman

It is not claimed here that the intervention questions and prompts quoted in Figure 5 are solely responsible for these changes – the students also received feedback from academic historians and from each other. The data in Figure 6 is suggestive, however, and indicates potential for future design research projects. It would be valuable to systematically test the effect that metacognitive feedback aiming to cultivate and develop methodological and conceptual thinking 'above the line' might have on student thinking about historical interpretation.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper set out to explore the potential of Rösen's 'disciplinary matrix' as a tool for evaluating student thinking about historical interpretation and for evaluating and developing pedagogies that aim to develop understandings of historical interpretation. The analysis presented in the paper has shown, first, that Rösen's matrix can be useful diagnostically as a tool for identifying dimensions of historical interpretation that pupils do and do not make reference to in their thinking. Second, the analysis has shown that the matrix can also be a useful tool for reflecting on and developing pedagogic strategies. Finally, the paper provides suggestive, if far from conclusive, reason to think that pedagogies informed by the kinds of thinking embodied in the 'matrix' can be helpful in progressing pupil thinking and, thus, suggests possible avenues for future research and practice.

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