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Historical reasoning in the classroom: What does it look like and how can we enhance it?

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Historical reasoning in the classroom: What does it look like and how can we enhance it?

The history education community has long recognised that historical thinking depends on the interplay between substantive knowledge about the past and the procedural, or second-order, concepts that historians use to construct, shape and give meaning to that substance. While the nature of that interplay and the processes by which we enable pupils to engage in it have been examined in countless specific instances (in teaching about the causes of the English Civil War, for example, or about the nature and extent of change brought about by the American Civil Rights movement) we rarely seek to examine the relationship between the different components of historical thinking in general terms. In this article, based on a wealth of empirical research, Carla van Boxtel and Jannet van Drie seek to do just that. They offer history teachers (and researchers) a framework for analysing historical reasoning that allows them not only to identify the different components that play a part in the process of constructing historical explanations or arguments, but also to evaluate the effectiveness of the different kinds of tasks that they might use to develop pupils’ historical reasoning.

In history classrooms pupils acquire knowledge about numerous historical figures, events, developments and themes. An important question is whether pupils are able to use their historical knowledge to think and reason about past and current phenomena. Can they explain why industrialisation in Europe started in England and not elsewhere? Can they make sense of people voting for the Nazis in the 1930s? Can they use their knowledge of the Protestant Reformation to explain why, in our current society, part of the Christian community belongs to a church under the authority of a pope and part of it does not? Can they understand why a television documentary on slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries currently triggers so much debate? This process of putting knowledge of the past to use in making sense of particular situations is often referred to as historical thinking or historical reasoning.

We think that engaging pupils in historical reasoning contributes to meaningful learning since it ensures that the learned knowledge is fully understood. In addition, we consider historical reasoning an important competency to develop, so that as they go on learning pupils can make productive use of their historical knowledge to interpret new information or develop deeper understanding. This raises the question of what historical reasoning actually looks like in the classroom and how we can enhance it. In this article, we first present a framework for analysing historical reasoning that we have developed from a range of empirical research literature, including our own empirical studies, in order to investigate the nature and quality of historical reasoning in different kinds of contexts – in pupils’ writing, in small group interactions and in whole-class discussions – and to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching methods aimed at enhancing pupils’ historical reasoning. We then provide examples of powerful instructional designs and strategies that have been shown to enhance historical reasoning in the classroom. Finally, we provide suggestions for how our framework can be used by teachers as a tool to improve their curriculum and teaching practice.

Historical reasoning

We prefer to use the term historical reasoning rather than historical thinking, since it can be described in terms of concrete activities expressed in speech or writing, resulting in a process of reasoning which can be evaluated for its quality. Figure 1 is a visualisation of the framework we have developed to conceptualise reasoning in the classroom in terms of several interrelated activities.

Historical reasoning aims at historical understanding. It concerns one of three things: the evaluation or construction of a description of processes of change and continuity, an explanation of a historical phenomenon or a comparison of historical phenomena or periods. This is shown in the centre of the figure. In the history classroom, pupils are also asked to reason about sources, such as historical documents or images, that can be used as evidence about what happened in the past. We have not, however, included this last form of reasoning.

Carla van Boxtel and Jannet van Drie

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in the centre of our framework because it contributes to the construction of the other types mentioned. Reasoning about the trustworthiness of a primary document, for example, is historically meaningful when this document is evaluated in order to explain how or why a certain event happened. Of course, it depends on the specific question or task that pupils are working on which forms of reasoning are important. They do not necessarily all have to appear together. In complex historical reasoning, however, they are combined.

But what do we actually do when we describe a process of change, explain or compare historical phenomena? That is what we describe in the outer circle in which we distinguish six components of historical reasoning. Thus, historical reasoning is defined as constructing or evaluating a description of processes of change and continuity, an explanation of a historical phenomenon, or a comparison of historical phenomena or periods by asking historical questions, contextualising, using substantive and second-order historical concepts, and putting forward claims supported with arguments, which are based on sources used as evidence.

Historical questions are often the start, but they can also be an element within, or a result of, historical reasoning. They can open up new issues that need to be considered, or that require more substantial evidence, a better explanation or more information about the particular context. Understanding and interpreting historical events and individual acts requires knowledge of the specific historical context. In order to describe, explain or compare, one needs to situate a historical phenomenon, object, statement, document or picture in a temporal, spatial and social context (contextualisation). Both discipline-bound substantive and second-order concepts are important ‘tools’ with which we analyse and describe processes of change and continuity, explain and compare.

Claims about the past should be supported with arguments based upon evidence. In history, evidence is often incomplete or provides conflicting information. This means that there are always multiple interpretations possible. That is why argumentation is a crucial part of historical reasoning. Constructing an historical argument comprises weighing different possible interpretations and taking into account potential counter-arguments supported with historical evidence. When engaged in finding or evaluating evidence, pupils need to critically evaluate and compare multiple sources, synthesising what they learn from them into a coherent description, explanation or account.

**Integrated approach**

Our particular approach to historical reasoning adds to existing approaches in studies on historical reasoning in three ways: (1) it takes an integrated approach; (2) it focuses on activities explicit in pupils’ speech and writing; and (3) it incorporates historical knowledge. Most research focuses on one aspect of historical reasoning, such as critical examination of historical sources or pupils’ ability to contextualise when confronted with the actions of people in the past that seem strange from a present-day perspective. These studies provide important insights into the cognitive activities involved in each separate component of historical reasoning. Historical reasoning, however, is a complex activity that involves a whole range of inter-related activities. Since much discourse in the history classroom and many tasks that pupils work on reflect this complexity, we have tried to integrate the various forms and aspects of historical reasoning within one framework.
I believe that in the House of Democracy you should pay much attention to Johan Thorbecke. He is, so to speak, the founder of democracy. Without the implementation of his constitution, the Netherlands wouldn’t be a democracy that also developed into a welfare state. The constitution of Thorbecke not only had a large effect on the present, but also on the past (in his own time). Before the constitution the king had too much power. This easily resulted in abuse and corruption. The king, for example, arranged many issues by Royal Decree, thus without legislation. The constitution of Thorbecke resulted in a more powerful States General, which was the first and probably also the biggest step towards a just, democratic state/kingdom.

Of course there are many other significant persons and events that belong in the House of Democracy. For example, universal suffrage and Willem Drees. In my opinion, however, Thorbecke is still the most significant. As a counter-argument it is often said that Thorbecke’s constitution gave only power to a limited group. The richest men were allowed to vote, the rest were excluded. The implementation of universal suffrage was, unlike the constitution of Thorbecke, for the whole people. In this way the people governed, which is what democracy is about: ‘government by the people’. This could be a reason to say that universal suffrage is more significant than Thorbecke. However, I disagree with that. Thorbecke’s constitution had many consequences for society now and back then, and universal suffrage was in fact one of the consequences of Thorbecke’s constitution. This happened because after the States General gained more influence, the cooperation and bundling of powers on the basis of religion and conviction became stronger. That resulted in political parties. The founding of political parties was related to universal suffrage and the School Struggle. Also the actions of Willem Drees are consequences of Thorbecke’s constitution. Without a democracy there never would have developed a welfare state, Willem Drees would have not come far with his ideas of solidarity and attending to the interests of the people if there had not been a democratic system in place. As a party member he would not have much power. Without a democracy the people would not be governing and the constitution that Thorbecke implemented in 1848 has remained until now the foundation of Dutch parliamentary democracy.

Thus Thorbecke did not only affect the lives of many people living in that period. He also caused far-reaching changes. He is not only an example for people now, but he also was responsible for many positive consequences in the long term. Consequences we still notice.

### Historical reasoning as an activity

An important approach in the existing literature has been to investigate the ideas that pupils hold about the second-order concepts of history, such as evidence, cause, explanation, empathy, time, space, change, source, historical significance and fact. Several studies show how pupils’ ‘naïve’ conceptions of the second-order concepts that frame the way we make sense of the past differ from the ideas of those who have more expertise in the domain. Lee and Shemilt, for example, discuss how pupils understand causation in history. A pupil who understands that historical explanation requires more than a single immediate cause (such as ‘Hitler caused World War II by invading Poland’) has a more powerful way of thinking about why things happen. A deeper understanding of the second-order concept of change and continuity is likely to result in a more elaborate description of a particular process of change: for example, by distinguishing between aspects of change and of continuity, between gradual and sudden changes, and between political, economic, social, and cultural changes. Understanding of disciplinary concepts thus underpins the strategic knowledge that is needed to construct a reasoned argument in history.

Among the disciplinary concepts that pupils need to understand are those that relate to the nature of historical knowledge itself and the way in which it is constructed. Maggioni, VanSledright and Alexander distinguish between three possible conceptions of history: history as isomorphic or identical to the past; history as purely an issue of personal opinions; and history as resulting from a process of inquiry in which answers to questions need to be supported by evidence. When history is considered simply as the story of what happened in the past, there actually is no need to consider plural perspectives nor to construct an historical argument. Therefore, it is important that pupils come to see history as a process of inquiry.

Both pupils’ understanding of second-order concepts and their epistemological ideas about history will shape how they speak and write about the past. We are specifically interested in how these understandings become ‘visible’ in explicit reasoning; in how pupils interpret and evaluate processes of change and continuity, explain and compare historical phenomena or evaluate historical evidence.

### The importance of historical knowledge

The quality of pupils’ historical reasoning is not purely shaped by their understanding of second-order concepts and heuristics specific to the domain, and by their epistemological beliefs about the domain; it also depends on their knowledge of historical facts, concepts and chronology. Although several authors contend that specific content knowledge plays an important role in pupils’ historical thinking and reasoning, they often do not specify exactly how this knowledge plays a role. Our framework integrates the use of content knowledge with the use of the second-order concepts of history. Pupils obviously need to use substantive concepts, such as the Roman Empire, colonialism and the Industrial Revolution as tools when describing, explaining or comparing historical phenomena. Knowledge of specific facts, of substantive concepts and of the relationships between them are strongly present in the act of historical contextualisation. When
contextualising, one situates a historical phenomenon, object, statement, document or picture in a temporal, spatial, and social context in order to better describe, explain or compare. Pupils need knowledge of facts, concepts and chronology in order to construct such a context.\(^8\)

### Historical reasoning in a written product

We can illustrate the components of historical reasoning by applying the framework to two examples of reasoning, one developed in writing and one in speech. The first example (see Figure 2) shows the reasoning of Selma (a 16-year-old pupil) in an argumentative letter of recommendation. Selma participated in a series of lessons on the development of parliamentary democracy in the Netherlands from 1800 to the present.\(^9\) In the final assignment of this unit pupils were asked to write a letter to a foundation that was organising an exhibition about the development of democracy in the Netherlands. They had to make the case for a particular person or event, that, in their opinion, should definitely be part of the exhibition. In addition, they were instructed to compare their first choice with two other individuals or events from the list of the top ten that had been constructed in the classroom after investigating several historical figures and events related to the development of democracy. The pupils had to argue why they considered their first choice more historically significant than either of the others.

In this letter Selma puts forward the claim (argumentation) that Johan Thorbecke, a liberal Dutch politician and statesman living in the nineteenth century, played a significant role in the development of parliamentary democracy and therefore should be included in the exhibition. She first provides a context (contextualisation) for the actions of Johan Thorbecke. She argues that before Thorbecke designed a new constitution, it was the king who had all power. This contextualisation supports her claim that the constitution of Thorbecke meant a big change. Selma uses her knowledge of how the Netherlands were governed at the beginning of the nineteenth century to contextualise the actions of Thorbecke, and to make clear that his actions caused changes (although she does not describe how and when the Netherlands became a parliamentary democracy).

In her letter, Selma uses a lot of substantive concepts (all of which we have underlined) which are related to the topic of parliamentary democracy, such as constitution, universal suffrage, political parties and the School Struggle (a Dutch conflict over the public financing of religious schools in the nineteenth century). Her knowledge of these concepts enables her to argue why Thorbecke was a significant person. One of her arguments is that without Thorbecke’s constitution the Netherlands would not be a democracy that also developed into a welfare state. This relationship is, however, not really worked out in an elaborate way. Selma also applies her understanding of the second-order concepts historical significance, change and cause. She is aware of criteria that can be used to argue why a particular person can be considered historically significant and explains why Thorbecke was important in his own time and why he can be considered important in the present. Selma also discerns and distinguishes between immediate consequences and effects in the long term. This reflects a rather sophisticated understanding of change and causation in history.

Selma provides arguments (argumentation) for her claim that Thorbecke had a profound impact on the development of democracy in the Netherlands. She also considers a potential counter-argument in her reasoning (which pupils generally tend not to do), pointing out that some people may say that...
Figure 4: Excerpt from a whole-class discussion

Mary  The serfs are walking in front of the knights. They are a kind of peasant who work for the nobility and they had to till the ground of that nobility.

Teacher  Yes. Yes, guys, Mary actually mentions a lot of good things.

Teacher  And now the question, why did these people do this? Because we don’t have this system any more, we don’t know this. Perhaps it is interesting to see how the system developed. Why did people obey this system?

Mary  Yes, they benefited from it as well. When they tilled the ground they got food. Yes, they had to pay a little bit for it. And they also got protection.

Teacher  Can you repeat that, when they...?

Mary  Yes, when they tilled the land, they got food.

Teacher  Who do you mean by ‘they’?

Mary  The serfs tilled the land for the nobility.

Femke  [raises her hand]

Teacher  Do you want to add something to this answer or want to make a change?

Femke  When the serfs tilled the land of the castle, in return, they got protection of the castle in case they were attacked themselves.

Thorbecke’s constitution only gave power to a limited number of people, whereas general suffrage enabled government ‘by the people’. But she then weakens this counter-argument by explaining that universal suffrage can also be considered a consequence of Thorbecke’s constitution. In the end she comes to a final conclusion summarising her arguments using criteria for historical significance.

Although in her letter Selma does not explicitly refer to historical sources to support her arguments, during the previous lesson sequence she had worked together in a group of four pupils and studied historical sources which contained various arguments related to the possible significance of Thorbecke. The specific assignment to write a letter did not require any explicit reference to the sources they had considered.

**Historical reasoning in a whole-class discussion**

The second example shows an example of historical reasoning that is co-constructed in a teacher-guided, whole-class discussion. The discussion was generated through a group task in which pupils aged 12-13 were asked to write a caption for the image shown in Figure 3. They were asked to improve the following explanation for this image: ‘Men on horses and men on foot leave their domain to go and fight.’ They could click on the concepts to get more information and on hot spots in the image. These hot spots each posed a question, such as ‘Why did these men on foot join the men on horses?’ The pupils’ caption had to include at least three substantive concepts from the lists next to the image.

The reasoning is initiated by a historical question asked by the teacher. In order to construct a historical explanation he asks an explanatory question: ‘why did these people do this?’ The excerpt in Figure 4 shows only part of the explanation that is co-constructed by the teacher and his pupils, with the teacher specifying the relationships between knights and peasants and providing a historical context to better understand the actions of knights and peasants in the Early Middle Ages. What Mary and Femke know about serfs and nobles in the Middle Ages is used to situate what can be seen in the image in its historical context: serfs tilled the land for the nobility and in return they got protection in case they were attacked. Knowledge about the relationships between nobles and peasants (serfs) thus enables contextualisation. The explanation that is constructed does not require a deep understanding of causation (such as the role of multiple causes or structural causes) but it does require that pupils take a historical perspective by focusing on the characteristics of life in the time of the Early Middle Ages. Mary’s statement that ‘they had to pay a little bit for it’, reflects her naïve or presentist idea that at that time money was used to pay for services or land. Femke, however, frames it differently. Later on in the whole-class discussion the teacher comes back to the issue of money and makes clear that in the Early Middle Ages money was hardly used and explains why that was the case.

In the whole-class discussion and the collaborative work that preceded the discussion in Figure 4, pupils transformed their more everyday language into the language of history. When collaborating in dyads, pupils first used the terms ‘peasants’ and ‘men on horses’ to interpret the historical image, but later on they used substantive concepts such as ‘serfs’, peasants who were tied to their ‘landlords’ and ‘nobles’. The excerpt shows that the teacher introduced the term ‘system’. Later he developed this to become the ‘manorial system’. In this case, the concepts ‘serfs’, ‘nobles’ and ‘manorial system’ facilitate the construction of an explanation for the behaviour of the men shown in the image. Although the teacher could have discussed the image as a historical source (Who made it? For what reasons? Is it representative for that time?) he did not do so on this occasion.
You may have noticed that our framework for analysing historical reasoning does not provide a definition of high- and low-quality reasoning. This is because the specific criteria with which we assess the quality of pupils’ questioning, contextualisation, use of concepts or argumentation always need to be attuned to the particular task and group of pupils. For example, since the task to write a letter (Figure 2) asked for argumentation about the significance of historical persons and events, we not only looked at the number and quality of the arguments pupils gave, but also whether these arguments were related to different types of significance (which can also be considered a second-order concept in history). Furthermore, in our assessment of the quality of the letters of recommendation pupils wrote, we scored the appearance of contextualisation, the specific use of the concept of ‘democracy’ and the explicit use of second-order concepts. Our framework thus operates as a flexible tool which can enable us to develop specific instruments for the analysis of pupils’ reasoning in particular examples of collaborative work, whole-class discussions, reading and writing in order to answer a variety of research questions.

**Triggering and supporting historical reasoning**

Having identified the elements that make up historical reasoning, we can focus on research questions concerned with how we can stimulate pupils’ historical reasoning in the classroom and how we can help them to overcome the problems and difficulties they might experience. As is now clear, historical reasoning is a complex activity, and the framework allows us to identify the key components and their inter-relationships, making it possible for us to describe and compare pupils’ reasoning in various tasks and to relate it to strategies used by the teacher.

In studying these strategies, we make a distinction between *triggering* historical reasoning and *supporting* it. In looking at how teachers trigger historical reasoning we are asking about the characteristics of tasks that elicit pupils’ historical reasoning. In looking at what supports historical reasoning we are focusing on the characteristics of tasks, tools and teacher strategies that seem to improve pupils’ reasoning. So far we have found three features that seem to be important in triggering historical reasoning: (1) open-ended tasks or questions; (2) tasks that are meaningful from both a curriculum and a pupil perspective; and (3) tasks that engage pupils in constructive activity. In our studies we have thus far focused on two means of supporting historical reasoning: the use of representational formats and the role of the teacher in whole-class discussions. Each of these is discussed below.

**Open-ended tasks or questions**

In an experimental study we compared two kinds of inquiry-tasks in an electronic learning environment; one directed at explanation, and one directed at evaluation.11 The main question in the explanatory condition was: ‘How can the changes in the behaviour of Dutch youth in the 1960s be explained?’ The main question in the evaluative condition was: ‘Were the changes in the behaviour of Dutch youth revolutionary?’ We found that the evaluative task not only triggered more historical reasoning in pupil (chat-) conversations, compared to the explanatory question, but also that this reasoning was more elaborated and constructed in a more collaborative manner by both pupils together (instead of one pupil dominating). The essays written in the evaluative condition were of a higher quality, especially in terms of argumentation. We expected that the explanatory group would score higher on explanation, but they did not; pupils in the evaluative condition included about as much explanation in their texts as the explanatory condition. So, evaluative questions seem to be powerful in triggering historical reasoning, in talking and in writing. This is in line with the revised version of Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives, in which evaluation is considered a higher-order thinking skill.12 Evaluative questions are higher-order questions and open-ended and therefore elicit elaborate reasoning. They also seem to trigger consideration of more of the different components of historical reasoning.13

**Authentic and meaningful tasks**

The second means by which to trigger historical reasoning depends on setting tasks that are meaningful from both a curriculum and a pupil perspective. We illustrate this with our study on historical significance, from which Selma’s letter derives.14 Two classes of 16-year-old pupils (studying a pre-university course) worked for a series of five lessons on the question asking which person or event was most significant for the development of Dutch democracy (which is an evaluative question). The pupils worked in groups, each studying one person or event, and presented their outcomes to the rest of the class. In differently composed groups they discussed and compiled a list of the top ten contributors. The resulting lists were put together, which resulted in a class top ten, which was consequently discussed in the class. The lessons were embedded in an authentic setting: the final task was to write a letter of recommendation to the Foundation House of Democracy, a real foundation that was planning to organise an exhibition on Dutch democracy. In addition, the question of historical significance in itself can also be meaningful to pupils, since they are asked to think for themselves why people and events from the past are important and for what reasons. It also makes them think of the impact of historical figures and events on present times and their own lives.15 We videotaped and transcribed two whole-class discussions in which the top ten was discussed and found that the discourse contained a large number of utterances that could be coded as historical reasoning (other utterances were for example related to giving instruction and classroom management by the teacher or social talk by students). In Class A 76 per cent of the discussion contained historical reasoning, of which 32 per cent was contributed by the teacher and 44 per cent by the students. In Class B 79 per cent was historical reasoning, 26 per cent of which came from the teacher and 53 per cent from the students. (These findings are quite high in comparison with other whole-class discussions in the Netherlands, in which we found 50–60 per cent of the discussion consisted of historical reasoning, half of which came from the teacher and half from the students). The reasoning displayed showed a lot of argumentation and comparison. So, using an authentic setting and a meaningful question seem to stimulate pupils’ historical reasoning in a classroom discussion.
The third characteristic of tasks that trigger historical reasoning comes from a study conducted by Prangsma, van Boxtel and Kanselaar. In this study pupils aged 12 to 14 worked in pairs on different tasks about the Early Middle Ages using a combination of text and pictures, over the course of three lessons. One task required the pupils to complete a storyboard about the decline of the Roman Empire; another asked them to construct a causal network showing the effects of the fall of the Western Roman Empire. For the third task pupils had to describe an image related to manorialism, while the final task required them to complete two cartograms on the spread of Christianity and Islam. The type of task had a significant effect on the percentage of content utterances and the total number of historical concepts used during group work. In the storyboard task pupils' interaction included the highest proportion of utterances about historical phenomena (58 per cent). This task also elicited the highest number of substantive concepts and more talk about a wider variety of concepts related to the topic. In this storyboard task (see Figure 5) pupils constructed a process diagram showing the decline of the Roman Empire. Pupils had to select and sequence pictures that together could tell a logical story of how the Roman Empire in the West disappeared. They were asked to add a concept and caption for each picture based on a text about the fall of the Roman Empire. Finally, they had to summarise two causes of the disappearance of the Roman Empire. Thus, selecting appropriate pictures, sequencing pictures in chronological order and writing a caption that requires the use of historical concepts can be considered activities that are powerful in stimulating pupil talk in which pupils actively use historical concepts to describe and explain a process of change. These are constructive activities that aim to stimulate historical reasoning between the pupils.

Using representational tools

The second question we focus on in our research is: How can we support the process of historical reasoning? Based on the outcomes of the study about the 1960s and the role of the over-arching question, we tried to support pupils' reasoning by adding representational tools. Research showed that constructing a representation, either individually or in collaboration with others, supports the process of learning and reasoning. The representational tools we added were used to select and order information from the sources, as a preparation for writing an essay. The representations were constructed collaboratively. We compared three different representational formats: an argumentative diagram, a list and a matrix. We found no differences in the overall quality of the written texts that pupils produced; however we did find differences in the type of discourse that was enhanced. Use of the matrix scored significantly higher on several aspects of historical reasoning. There was more historical reasoning and pupils talked more, for example, about historical changes and their reasoning was more elaborate. The matrix seemed to have prompted pupils to fill in all the empty boxes, including a description of each change, and to answer the question as to whether this change was revolutionary or not. There was no difference in the overall quality of their written responses, but they more often categorised the historical changes as political, cultural or economic. So, the particular representational format used shaped pupils'
historical reasoning, and each format was found to have its own affordances and constraints. They direct pupils’ attention to specific aspects of the task: diagrams and lists tend to direct attention towards processes of argumentation, while the matrix encourages an emphasis on historical changes. The challenge therefore is to design representational formats that are domain-specific and support particular aspects of historical reasoning.18

Teacher strategies: deepening and broadening

Historical reasoning can also be supported in whole-class discussions by the teacher. Whole-class discussions are often used in history education, but often the teacher does most of the talking. However, we believe it is important that pupils take an active role during these discussions to practise historical reasoning. This active role can be seen in terms of high numbers of participants, and pupils responding to each other as well as to the teacher, and making substantive contributions to the discussion. To do so, pupils’ must be well prepared, for example through small group work in which they can practise in a safe environment.19 In addition, the aim or the central question of the discussion should be clear to everyone and provide a strong focus to the discussion. Evaluative questions are very suitable for this, as we have shown before in the example of the discussion of historical significance. Visual representations can also be used, since discussing a picture or a representational format provides the pupils with a joint problem space – an obvious focus for their discussion to which they can easily refer.20

The role of the teacher during the discussion is very important, and much has been written about the role of the teacher in classroom interaction.21 When aiming at stimulating pupils’ participation in whole-class discussion, the questions asked should be directed not towards evaluating what pupils know (by asking closed questions) but towards eliciting pupils’ thinking – making this thinking explicit and open for further discussion. Questions can be used to challenge the pupils to elaborate on previous ideas, to provide arguments, and to engage them in domain-specific reasoning. The questions used for these purposes are more open and require longer answers. In practice, feedback often takes the form of an evaluative comment; the teacher decides whether the answer is correct by evaluating it against canonical knowledge and/or rephrases it in a more scientific manner. However, in order to foster ongoing discussion, the feedback should not function as an evaluation but as a starting point for a new cycle. Instead of evaluating the response of the pupil, the teacher should ask for elaboration, or invite other pupils to respond. Other effective teacher strategies for promoting historical reasoning are: asking for explanation (of either a ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answer), inviting pupils to respond to each other or reformulating their responses using domain-specific concepts.

The discourse on a medieval picture with knights and armed serfs (Figure 3) that is presented in Figure 4 provides a good illustration of the role of the teacher during a whole-class discussion. This teacher not only uses more general strategies to stimulate pupil participation, but also more domain-specific ones: he asks for explanation and contextualisation. In Figure 6 we have listed some examples of teacher questions. These questions are aimed at deepening the pupils’ understanding of the picture and what it represents: first by describing the picture using historical concepts, then by situating it in the context of the manorial system, and next by situating the feudal system in the context of the Middle Ages. In this way the teacher is deepening pupils’ understanding. In the study from which this example derives, we compared discussions in small groups with whole-class discussion and found that more diverse aspects of historical reasoning were used in the whole-class discussion. These aspects were all initiated by the teacher, giving rise, for example, to more explanation. We also found in another study that the teacher added other components of historical reasoning to the discussion, components that were not directly related to the first goal of the task. In this way the teacher is broadening pupils’ reasoning.

Thus the teacher can work both to deepen historical reasoning, by adding more depth to one particular element, and to broaden it by encouraging the inclusion of other elements.22 In discussing the causes of outbreak of the First World War, for example, the teacher can deepen the focus on causation by asking questions that are related to the contribution of multiple causes, or questions that involve relating the different causes to each other, or questions that require categorisation of the causes using terms such as political or economic causes, and identifying differences between direct and indirect causes, and so on. Broadening the pupils’ historical reasoning would mean including other aspects of historical reasoning in the
The value of the framework to researchers and teachers

This framework for analysing historical reasoning in the classroom was developed in the context of our empirical research on historical reasoning. It enables us to describe pupils’ historical reasoning in different settings and to compare the effects of different tasks, tools and teacher strategies. 

In some studies we focus on specific forms or components in our framework, for example causal reasoning, contextualisation or the asking of historical questions.\(^1\) We also pay attention to how factors such as pupils’ interest, conceptual and chronological overview knowledge and epistemological beliefs affect pupils’ reasoning. In addition to these research purposes the framework can be helpful for teachers, for example when designing curricula, tasks or assessment. The framework not only provides us with a clear focus on what we are aiming at in the history classroom; using it to analyse the appearance and quality of reasoning in the classroom may also make clear which aspects need more attention given a particular class of pupils, individual pupils or (sequence of) tasks. In this respect it is also important to think about the content and strategic knowledge and epistemological beliefs that are needed to develop pupils’ historical reasoning ability.

We deliberately set out to introduce historical reasoning as a key activity for pupils in the history classroom. All too often it turns out to be mainly the teacher or the textbook that is asking historical questions, describing processes of change, explaining and comparing historical phenomena. If we are to switch the emphasis and make sure that it is the pupils who are engaged in these processes – engaging in historical reasoning to develop, demonstrate and secure their understanding – then these studies show how teachers’ skilful questioning and well-designed tasks can both trigger and support it.

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8 The knowledge that is used to contextualise successfully is discussed in Van Boxtel, C. and Van Drie, J. (2009) ‘That’s in the time of the Romans! Knowledge and strategies students use to contextualize historical images and documents’ in Cognition and Instruction, 30, No. 2, pp.113-145.
9 The example derives from a study conducted by Janvert Van Drie. See Van Drie, J., Van Boxtel, C. and Stam, B. (in preparation) ‘Thinking about historical significance as a means to promote learning and reasoning in history’.
10 The example derives from a study conducted by Carla Van Boxtel. See Van Boxtel, C. (June 2002) ‘Small group collaboration compared with teacher-guided collaboration in the whole class’. paper presented at the International Society for Cultural Research and Activity Theory (IScRAT) Congress, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
13 Van Drie (2005) op. cit.
14 Participants of this study were two history teachers and their classes (in sum 43 students). See Van Drie, J., Van Boxtel, C. and Stam, B. (in preparation) ‘Thinking about historical significance as a means to promote learning and reasoning in history’.
23 See the study of Logtenberg (2012) op. cit. on historical questioning and the study of Van Boxtel and Van Drie (2012) op. cit. on contextualisation.