Teaching for Empowerment: Creative Use of Student-Generated Knowledge to Enrich Learning

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Abstract

This paper will use the approaches and practices adopted by Dr. Aihe Wang, Honorary Associate Professor from School of Chinese at HKU, to illustrate how a student-generated knowledge project empowered students to grow into producers of knowledge by developing them as partners during the implementation process. This project provides an opportunity for students to co-construct an online database of oral history testimonies. To prepare, undertake, analyze, and document their oral history interviews, students need to be actively engaged in reading, researching, asking, discussing, interpreting and writing. At the final stage of the project, each student generates a one-page archive, and all participants co-construct an online oral history archive. Through this case study, I seek to demonstrate how this project enhances students' critical thinking abilities and empowers students to be knowledge producers for a student-built oral history online archive. This study also attempts to address the active role of teachers in this learning process. Teachers should actively adjust teaching methodology based on students' difficulties and provide support to help students develop deeper levels of thinking.

1. Introduction

Empowering students to be independent and critical thinkers is considered one of the most important educational goals of higher education (HERI, 2009; Pith-

ers & Soden, 2000). Independent, critical thinking has never been in such dire need here and now. In today's information society, people receive a plethora of complex and even conflicting explanations of any given phenomenon. To brave this new world, all students need intellectual muscles.

To become critical thinkers, students first need to be active and engaged learners. Scholarship shows that critical thinking skills are enhanced when students become active in their learning process (Walker, 2003; Kusumoto, 2018). Developing students as partners is a powerful means to make learning more stimulating and intellectually challenging, as scholars agree (Barnett, 2014; Levy & Petrulis, 2012). Partnership is a "reciprocal process" through which students and teachers work collaboratively on teaching and learning (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014: p. 6). "Student-teacher partnership" recognizes the importance of a reciprocal learning process, through which students are empowered to move beyond the role of passive receptors in the traditional static learning environment.

In the traditional type of education, or "banking education" as Freire describes it, "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (Freire, 1970: p. 72). Similarly, in a traditional history lecture, the professor delivers a carefully crafted lecture to a large body of students who passively receive information. In this way of transmitting knowledge, students are passive recipients absorbing knowledge from their teacher. In this type of education, as Marton and Säljö (1976) pointed out, students engage in surface-level processing, passively memorizing and reproducing information. They are not empowered to think critically or contribute knowledge. In contrast, scholars share the view that students engaged in research partnership *with* teachers better develop their intellectual and practical capabilities to co-create meaning and knowledge (Brew, 2006; Neary & Winn, 2009).

To enhance students' critical thinking skills, engaging them to co-create knowledge has been integrated into teaching and learning in many universities. But due to the constraints of lecture-based curricula and large class sizes, in which students passively absorb information, it has been difficult to apply this method in college education. In addition, few studies have examined how teachers in higher education can actively engage students to facilitate knowledge building process.

This article will use the practices adopted by Dr. Aihe Wang, Honorary Associate Professor from School of Chinese, The University of Hong Kong, to demonstrate how this student-teacher partnership can be useful in enhancing students' critical thinking abilities and empowers them to be knowledge-makers. Based on my investigation of Dr. Wang's teaching practice, I provided my own analysis as a colleague of her. This study also attempts to address the active role of teachers in adjusting teaching methodology based on students' difficulties during this learning process.

2. Student-Generated Knowledge: An Oral Histroy Project

Over the last few years, Dr. Wang's students increasingly expressed an interest in engaging their own family histories in their learning. This has firstly been demonstrated in class discussions, with students actively offering their family history to illustrate the impact of history, or to challenge scholarly conclusions. Furthermore, some students have spontaneously used the knowledge from the course to explore their family history. Based on this initiative, her teaching team proposed a project entitled "Pilot Project on Student Generated Knowledge: An Oral History Online Archival Database", which won a Teaching Development Grant from The University of Hong Kong in 2018.

As a result of the students' interest, this student-generated body of knowledge was formally integrated into her course design as a new component of course work and assessment and was further developed into a database of students' co-created knowledge in academic year 2018-19. This project deepened the engagement of students beyond passionate researchers and turned them into authors in building knowledge and making discoveries. In that academic year, a total number of 505 students and Dr. Wang's teaching team forged a research-based collaboration to explore new dimensions in history that had not been discovered before, thereby modeling a new form of partnership that challenged the traditional role of teachers as knowledge owners. This collaborative approach provides teachers the opportunity to incorporate student-generated knowledge immediately into the classroom.

3. Preparing for the Project: Teaching Practice and the Nurturing of Critical Thinking Capability

Critical thinking needs intellectual and academic tools. To prepare students for the oral history interview, they first need to learn how to critically analyze and evaluate historical knowledge from academic sources as well as the oral history testimonies they glean from their interviewees.

Dr. Aihe Wang prioritizes enabling the students to open their minds and widen their horizon. She strongly believes that the diversity of perspectives and methodologies have a profound influence on how one interprets information. Within a coherent framework, she presents different scholarly arguments for each topic, and allows students with a variety of different opinions to hear one another, thereby nurturing their intellectual capabilities. In fact, the reading and researching skills are not only necessary within the academic context. This analytical toolkit is no less valuable when applied to the realities of today's world. In the "post truth" era, developing the intellectual capability to critically evaluate controversial issues through multiple perspectives and methodologies becomes essential for long-term growth.

As an old Chinese saying goes, "give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." Instead of providing students with exact right or wrong answers, Dr. Wang introduces a range of course

readings promoting different scholarly arguments in order to help students open their minds and widen their horizons. Throughout the semester, students learn to distinguish different disciplinary methodologies (ranging from history, sociology, political and social sciences, to art and literature) and critically analyze sources including scholarly writings as well as films, novels, and archival cases.

In practice, Dr. Aihe Wang designs question-oriented lectures and frames every topic in a historical and critical perspective. In continuously questioning students and inspiring them to ask effective, deep, and refined research questions, she then leads them through critical thinking and academic analysis step by step. To start with, she uses in-class question and discussion to promote interactive teaching and facilitate students from multiple academic disciplines in sharing different perspectives and diverse sources of knowledge. This cross-disciplinary discussion strengthens students' motivation of participation in knowledge building.

In most cases, students are challenged by two opposite points of view put forward by different scholars. On this basis, she further trains students to practice analytical thinking by analyzing, critiquing, and evaluating cross-disciplinary sources. When students were confused by the two points of view, which both sound reasonable, Aihe then raised questions to stimulate students' academic mindset: does each scholar produce a logical and coherent argument? Are there any logical flaws and leaps? Finally, she led students to evaluate each scholar's research questions, methodologies, and mode of logic. Through this interactive and intense intellectual muscle exercise, students were trained in how the evidence was generated, selected, and interpreted.

4. Implementation of the Project

The methodology of oral history facilitates students to learn to refine research questions, design a research proposal, undertake interviews, and conduct disciplinary research. During the learning process, students engage in deep-level processing, not just learning history but recording, enriching and building it. Students were required to report their proposals, progress of interviews, and deliver their final products in the form of presentations in small-group tutorials. At the end of the semester, students generate their one-page online archives and co-construct the database.

The following timeline illustrates the phases of the project, and explains how each stage motivates students to actively seek and generate new knowledge with their own passion and inquiry. It is also important to note that throughout this active learning process, Dr. Wang's teaching team constantly responds to students' inquiries and makes timely and appropriate adjustments to the dynamic teaching process.

Project Phase 1: *oral history method training and pre-interview preparation*

The first phase of the project has two objectives. First, to provide students

with oral history method training and second, to elevate students' interest and stimulate their spirit of inquiry. A list of suggested interview questions and an overview of interview guidelines are provided in the first training tutorial. It is important to note that, in addition to this framework, teachers offer support to students to help them design their own tailor-made list of interview questions These questions are:

- Whose story is most interesting?
- What do I want to know about this person's life and why is it important?
- How to break down my wide-ranging inquiry into clearly understood, answerable interview questions?

After the training session, students need to identify a person to be their interviewee, find out that person's basic information, prepare a tailor-made question list, and refine their research questions. This pre-interview preparation seeks to enhance students' autonomy and passion to build new knowledge. The student-centered nature of the project ensures that students are actively involved in interviewee selection and the design of interview questions.

Phase 2: *interview and methodology report*

In this next stage, students are required to undertake the interview, report the process, and conduct disciplinary research, and at the same time reflect on their own research methodology and overcome challenges during the process.

The first challenge stems from the large class size. In each semester of 2018-19, more than 250 students were enrolled in the class. The students' interviewees come from a multitude of different geographical origins, with a wide diversity of social and cultural experiences. Students cannot then be overly dependent on the suggested interview questions provided by the teachers. Dr. Wang reminded students to be ready to follow the interviewees narrative during the interview and spontaneously ask new questions to discover stories well beyond their imagination. In this process, students are much more than passive listeners, they are transformed into active agents and seekers of knowledge in their own unique research initiative.

The second challenge stems from the interviewees' sometimes-hazy recollections of past events. Inevitably, the interviewee's stories are rarely told in strictly chronological order and memories may appear to be fragmented during the interview. The teaching team asked students to prepare a chronology of major events that happened in the person's life span, and this is an effective method to stimulate the interviewee's memory. To achieve this goal, students are motivated to be active, participating, and responsible interviewers who proactively work with the interviewee together to map their fragmented stories within a larger historical context.

During the interview process, students experience both a sense of achievement and stress. A few students reported that they could not find an interviewee, or their interviewees' stories were fragmented. The third challenge then is the absence of interviewee or lack of oral history materials.

This unexpected challenge raised obstacles for students, and obliged teachers needed to reflect on how to make timely and appropriate adjustments to the teaching strategy in the light of these difficulties. In response to students' frustration during the interview process, Dr. Wang provided an alternative for those whose stories were fragmented or incomplete due to difficulties in the interview process, suggesting they "write about their own reflections". In this way, those students' previous interview preparation time and effort is not wasted, and the process of reflection provides opportunities for deeper level thinking and learning. It is clear that students' knowledge producing does not just involve students' active participation, but also requires teachers to take on a dynamic role.

Phase 3: *final product and reflections*

Through this project, rather than *learning* knowledge in a traditional study approach, students learn how to *generate* knowledge for future history research. To conduct their independent research, students were motivated to engage with the sources assigned by the course more actively to contextualize and critically examine the oral history testimonies they collected from their interviews. At the final stage of the project, each student generates a one-page archive to report their completed story and makes an oral presentation, so together the entire cohort co-construct a virtual museum of oral histories. In the final tutorial, students who have accomplished their oral history interviews deliver formal presentations of their stories by mapping them within the overall chronology of the history.

In the case of those whose stories are incomplete due to difficulties encountered in the interview process, the presentation includes: 1) Challenges during the interview process; 2) Reflections on those challenges in the interview process; 3) Reflections and analysis of how these findings are contextualized together with the readings and film sources included in the course.

Benefits To Students And Teachers

Before discussing the findings of this study, I should acknowledge the nature of this qualitative research. In this study, although I did not seek to collect and present the quantitative data, I believe that this research provides insights into how the student-generated knowledge as an innovative teaching strategy could effectively enhance students' engagement and improve their critical thinking, as well bring benefits to the teachers.

Students experience more active engagement in learning

Through driving students as knowledge building partners, this project provided an active learning environment for students. To prepare, undertake, analyze, and document their oral history interviews, students were actively engaged in reading, researching, asking, discussing, interpreting, and writing.

To develop the project, students were motivated to engage with the sources assigned by the course more actively to contextualize and critically examine the oral history testimonies they collected from their interviews. Instead of viewing history as "fixed and stable forever, dropped out of the sky readymade" (Van-

Sledright, 2004: p. 232), students learnt to understand how history is continuously constructed, complemented, and contested. Through this process, students critically and independently constructed their own understandings of history, and embarked on "building and writing up their own interpretations of the past" (VanSledright, 2004: p. 232). In their final presentation, many students expressed that the oral history research revealed to them how complicated and multifaceted history can be. Some testimonies corroborate, and some challenge pre-existing scholarly conclusions. In Semester 1 of 2018-19, one student said, "what most impressed me while doing the one person project lies in the accuracy of information along the timeline when I compared the information with class materials."[1]

Students' critical thinking skills get improved

This oral history project provided a multi-faceted student experience that successfully enhances students' critical thinking. In each semester, encompassing more than 250 students from multiple backgrounds, this platform enables everyone to bring in diverse perspectives and different sources of knowledge. Together they can speak, communicate, and argue, hearing and learning from one another. In Semester 2 of 2018-19, one international student commented that,

"I was fascinated by the stories that most of my classmates had shared during my tutorial session. … [T]hank you for doing so as it has enriched everyone's learning and had turned something written and static into a collective and active experience."[2]

In addition to this multi-faceted nature of this learning experience, every phase of the project powerfully supported students to deepen their thinking, step by step. By the middle of the semester, most students are well on the way to deepening and refining their research topic. During the interview process, many students reported that the stories they unearthed surprised them beyond their imaginations, resulting in them spontaneously changing their research directions or strategies. Many even independently initiated additional research to seek out evidence to contextualize and corroborate their stories. Ultimately students move towards to making new discoveries and building new knowledge. This whole learning process was associated with "engagement", "empowerment", and a strong sense of "growing up".

Students' feedback and formative review of the project reflect the effectiveness of the project in fostering students' critical thinking. One student said,

"It is very easy for me to overlook the importance of a certain historical event because I was not ever engaged in it. … I am most impressed by the project, 'a person in history', in which the relations between a distant piece of history and a real person is brought out. …"[3]

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[1]This student's feedback was obtained from the post-course survey through the discussion forum on HKU Moodle e-learning platform in 2018-19 Semester 1.

[2]This quote was obtained from the post-course survey through the discussion forum on HKU Moodle e-learning platform in 2018-19 Semester 2.

[3]This quote was obtained from the post-course survey through the discussion forum on HKU Moodle e-learning platform in 2018-19 Semester 2.

Teachers experience enhanced motivation in teaching

It is also important to note that empowering students to generate new knowledge is not a static teaching process. Students' knowledge building cannot occur in isolation, and is co-dependent with active teaching. Rather than being knowledge providers, teacher became facilitators and work collaboratively with students during the project. To facilitate students' knowledge building, teachers increased their active participation and proactively helped students overcome their difficulties. A crucial element of active teaching requires teachers to keep considering and responding to students' difficulties, making timely and appropriate adjustments to the dynamic teaching process.

In the case of this teaching innovation project, student engagement and active teacher involvement are the two key ingredients of knowledge building which mutually enrich one another. Throughout the project, teachers must always be ready to adjust teaching strategies to accommodate students' needs. Dr. Wang's teaching team used every small-group tutorial to proactively communicate with students, taking detailed observation notes on students' questions, difficulties, and feedback, and to foster mutual trust. In addition, the teaching team and students forged partnerships outside of the regular teacher-student relationship. Teachers engaged in reflective dialogue with students through multiple communication channels, including the weekly discussion forums on HKU Moodle e-learning platform and after-class discussions. On this basis, the teaching members discussed the observation notes, students' feedback, and implications, to adjust the project for the next phase. The active involvement of teachers becomes another essential factor on the road to deepening students' level of thinking and learning.

Promote teacher's reflection on curriculum renewal

This project is a reciprocal process. Not only students learn from one another, but also teachers benefit from students' co-created knowledge. These students' research outputs, primarily based on personal and private experiences, have never appeared in larger historical narratives. The student-generated oral history research thus has been continuously integrated into the teacher's course materials and enriched future curriculum renewal.

Over the course of the project, it also provides more opportunities for Dr. Wang's teaching team to deeply understand students' needs and therefore actively and frequently reflect on the teaching strategy. The three phases of the project enable the teachers to observe more closely what students gained from their research and what challenges they experienced. Working collaboratively with the students, the teaching team also consciously reflects and adjusts methodology to help students overcome difficulties and discover surprises during the process. On this basis, the teachers could regularly review the course and engage in re-designing the course to enhance future student learning.

5. Conclusion

This article is a case study of the creative use of the student-generated knowledge

in teaching history, investigating the impact of an oral history project on the enhancement of students' critical thinking. The project deploys an effective and engaging teaching strategy to develop students as partners to co-create knowledge. Oral history interviews provide the groundwork for active engagement. Rather than consuming knowledge in a traditional way by memorizing and testing, students need to become engaging and passionate learners to discover real knowledge and participate in the building of a body of knowledge. Everyone who serves as an interviewer is inspired to explore, document, and critically reflect on their oral history testimonies.

Another critical factor undergirding this knowledge building process is Dr. Aihe Wang's active and dynamic role in facilitating the students' learning. To maximize student engagement, Dr. Wang constantly and proactively reviews and reflects on the students' achievements and difficulties. Whenever students are struggling, she makes timely adjustments to the instructional support given, and specifies redirections in response to students' new discoveries, questions and learning difficulties. This active teaching strategy allows for more flexibility related to the nature of students' final products, and even in such a large class, provides continuous and appropriate support for students' learning progress.

The result is that students develop broader and deeper understandings of the course material and feel empowered to think critically and build knowledge for themselves. Such capabilities are important to their intellectual and personal development, even though they may not pursue research careers. This kind of academic mindset is a pre-requisite for disentangling the rational and emotional narratives pertaining to real-world problems, and equips students with strong analytical and critical skills throughout their future life paths.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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