Questioning the past: student questioning and historical reasoning
Logtenberg, A.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

“It is not the answer that enlightens, but the question.”
Eugene Ionesco (French dramatist, 1909-1994)

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Aim and scope of this thesis

In history education there are several methods to motivate students for a specific historical topic. History teachers can introduce a new topic with an exciting anecdote, an appealing picture or a controversial statement or problem. Lesson starters or introductions like this can be used to arouse students’ curiosity, activate prior knowledge and engagement while working on classroom activities. Students can be stimulated to indicate what they think is interesting or striking and what type of question(s) they have.

Student questions can be used to connect to learning content and learning tasks. Much learning content in history textbooks in secondary education is explicitly or implicitly structured around questions, divided into main and subordinate questions. However, questions that students ask themselves can also give direction to learning activities. Students can learn to work on their own questions. When learning about the past by questioning, learning activities can be more meaningful if they are based on questions asked by students themselves. The underlying rationale of this approach is that students are more interested in their own questions than in questions formulated by teachers, textbooks and historians. Seixas (1993) supports this view and states that questions asked by the professional community are less relevant for students. Students can be regarded as novices in a domain and they ask questions, based on their own experiences and challenges within that domain, which are different to questions posed by experts. Barton and Levstik (2004) support the idea that students should investigate the past guided by their own questions. Research in other domains suggests that own questions may support deeper learning activities (Pedrosa de Jesus et al., 2006).
Van Drie and Van Boxtel (2008) define deep learning in history as historical reasoning. Besides learning facts about historical periods, developments and events, students should get acquainted with using these facts in historical reasoning. Historical reasoning relates to describing, comparing or explaining historical phenomena by asking historical questions, using sources, contextualization, argumentation and using substantive and meta-concepts of history. In Van Drie and Van Boxtel’s view, asking a historical question is one of the driving components of historical reasoning. A historical question can generate other components of historical reasoning and can be embedded in (or be the result of) historical reasoning. Thus, also in this light, a historical question formulated by a student can be considered a valuable learning activity when learning history.

Despite the fact that several scholars acknowledge the importance of asking questions for learning history, not much is known about the questions students ask in the domain of history. Furthermore, research in other domains reveals that students in secondary education hardly ask any (spontaneous) questions (Dillon, 1988; Van der Meij, 1994; Graesser & Person, 1994), and that the questions students do ask generally do not reflect deep thinking, being mainly procedural. On the other hand, research shows that students can ask thought-provoking questions (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1992) and that seemingly superficial questions do not always infer a superficial processing of content. Research also shows that the instruction to formulate questions can support text understanding and increase student engagement (Rosenshine, Meister & Chapman, 1996).

Besides contributing to theories on history learning and teaching, this dissertation aims to contribute to the questioning research literature by investigating domain-specific aspects of questioning and the role of affective processes such as interest and emotions. We study which questions students ask and the underlying process that precedes a question. We try to explain why and when certain types of questions are asked.

From a practical perspective, student questioning can be used by teachers to make history lessons more meaningful. In order to develop students’ ability to ask historical questions and to use student questioning as a meaningful learning activity in the history classroom, we need to gain more insight into how students can be stimulated to ask certain questions. Knowledge of how student questions are triggered and formulated can guide the development of lessons and learning activities to increase students’ question asking ability.

1.2 Research questions

This dissertation focuses on the significance of student questioning for learning history. We see student questioning as a learning activity. Research on questioning mainly focuses on the effect of questioning on other variables (e.g., text understanding, learning content). This dissertation regards student questions as a dependent variable. This is because many processes and functionalities can be associated with questions. We want to investigate what (internal and external) factors trigger student questions, the type and number of questions formulated, how questions are formulated and what cognitive and affective processes underlie the formulation of ques-
The questions we address are:

1) How can we define the ability to ask historical questions?
2) What is the effect of the type of introductory text on students' situational interest and the type and number of questions students generate?
3) What type of questions do students ask spontaneously while reading a historical introductory text and in what kind of thinking processes do questions originate?
4) What type of questions do students ask after reading a historical introductory text and to what extent are these questions embedded in historical reasoning?
5) Which questions do students consider important and interesting?

1.3 Structure of this dissertation

Chapter 2 provides a theoretical framework that discusses the conceptualization of questioning in history learning and the research on questioning in other domains. It describes questioning as one of the components of historical reasoning and how important aspects such as prior knowledge and affect shape questioning processes. This chapter provides a preliminary definition of students' ability to ask historical questions. This definition guides the empirical part of this dissertation.

Chapter 3 presents the first empirical study that investigated the questions students ask after reading historical introductory texts. The effects of different types of introductory text were investigated. We categorized different types of (historical) questions students asked after reading the texts. We investigated the following questions: what type of questions do students generate after reading an introductory text on a historical topic? and: what is the effect of the type of introductory text on situational interest, sources of interest and the type and number of questions generated?

Chapter 4 reports on the second empirical study that aimed at deeper understanding of processes that underlie student questions. This study builds on the findings of the first study. In this study we experienced that classifying and evaluating questions can be problematic without knowing the underlying processes that characterize questions students ask. A process study was performed in which students were asked to underline text segments while reading a historical introductory text. When a student underlined a text segment they were asked to verbalize their thoughts and ideas. This chapter describes the historical reasoning, prior knowledge and affect that students experienced while reading a historical introductory text. Secondly, it describes spontaneous questions that students asked and how these questions were embedded in historical reasoning, activation of prior knowledge and affective responses.

In Chapter 5 we discuss the same process study and investigate questions students asked after reading the text and underlining text segments. After reading the text students were instructed to formulate questions thinking-aloud. After that they were asked to choose their most important and most interesting question. We discuss the curriculum and student perspective on questioning and the processes that characterize questions embedded in historical reasoning. Some parts in Chapters 4 and 5
overlap because these chapters are submitted as journal articles and have comparable instruments and methods.

Finally, Chapter 6 summarizes the main outcomes of the studies. We discuss the findings and the implications for theory on historical questioning and reasoning by students. We also discuss some limitations of our work and future directions for research. We finish this chapter with some practical implications for teachers based on insights of our own work and educational literature on questioning.