From Knowing the Canon to Developing Skills: Engaging the Decoding the Disciplines Paradigm

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Teaching and learning in the humanities and the social sciences often revolve around a more or less formal canon of contents, concepts, and/or scholars. Hence, undergraduate courses are typically directed towards expanding the students’ knowledge base, rather than training them in disciplinary skills. While the latter is surely part of the curriculum, it is in practice often overshadowed by becoming acquainted with, and sometimes the rote memorizing of, the canon. Thereby, many students struggle at later stages, when a different set of disciplinary skills are required to succeed.

Our primary discipline, history, is an apt case in point. Traditionally, the better part of the first semester is taken up by survey courses that seek to cover the human past from antiquity to the present. Consequently, discussions on teaching and learning in history typically focus on what history we teach rather than how we teach history. While there certainly have been challenges to the former—in terms of which periods, regions, and social categories to be included—challenges to the latter are rare. Hence, successful contestations (such as social, gender, and global history) have resulted in adding to the canon, thereby cementing traditional teaching methods.¹

Yet, if we turn to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), it is evident that there are alternatives to canon centred teaching. We have been particularly inspired by Lendol Calder’s so called “uncoverage model”, which he has designed to counteract the traditional “coverage model”. At the heart of Calder’s distinction is the word “cover”, which in the context of teaching usually refer to the content covered in a course. However, “cover” can also mean to “cover up” and Calder argues that this is exactly what traditional survey courses do. They cover up how knowledge is made and which disciplinary skills are required to so. What is needed, he maintains, is a new signature pedagogy that “uncovers” these steps and help students develop disciplinary skills.²

Calder’s pedagogical ideas are closely related to the Decoding the Disciplines Paradigm. This initiative to increase student learning has gained considerable momentum in the last decades, and is now influencing teaching modes in various disciplines all over the world.³ At the heart of the paradigm are three basic tenets. Firstly, it focuses on local learning within specific disciplines, rather than on vague general skills such as critical thinking. Secondly, it centres on what students should be able to do, rather than what they need to know. Thirdly, it underscores that specialists in a field tend to be unaware of the basic mental operations required, as those skills have been automated and are thereby invisible to the specialist. Following these assumption, proponents of this paradigm takes a special interest in educational stages were many students fail to succeed. By decoding these learning processes, they seek to uncover the invisible disciplinary skills. Once these are known, it becomes possible to address the obstacles and alter course design.⁴

⁴ David Pace, The Decoding the Disciplines Paradigm. Seven Steps to Increased Student Learning, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).
Uncovering the Welfare State

Influenced by these pedagogical ideas, we have over the last few semesters redesigned and taught a five-week thematic course on the second term of the historical candidate programme. The course in question, “The Welfare State”, has shifted its primary learning objective from knowing about the topic towards developing the ability to pose a relevant historical question to a source material. That is, a skill which the students need to master at the next stage of their education: the writing of a shorter independent thesis.

Traditionally the thematic courses on the second term has been the first time the students have met specialised content, often connected to a field were researchers in the department are active. This thematic course dealt with the Swedish welfare state, covering a period of roughly 100 years. It is important to note that our redesign didn’t extend to the existing literature or curriculum, instead we focused on the planning and teaching of the course.

The coursework was structured in three blocks, loosely arranged on the subthemes of the formation, expansion and neoliberal challenges of the welfare state. Each block consisted of one introductory lecture, one text seminar and one source seminar. In preparation for the source seminars the students were handed two to three pre-selected historical sources and asked to make a source critical assessment and pose a historical question to each source material. The students then handed in their questions via a digital learning platform. After each seminar the students got written individual feedback from the teacher. The course ended with a take-home exam with two essay questions, one of which were to return to one of the source materials and give an outline of a larger historical study consisting of purpose, question and source critical assessment.5

To date, we have taught this course two times. The first time Andrés was responsible for the course, the second time Emma was responsible. Between the two occasions some minor changes regarding source materials was made, most important was the substitution of written sources with a documentary at the third source seminar.

Study Design

We have taken all proposed questions from the two first seminars and from the take-home exam and assessed them on their feasibility as valid scientific questions within the discipline of history. In a first step Andrés and Emma, who taught the course, made a taxonomy of different types questions based upon a qualitative reading of the material. After that Andrés and Emma made individual assessments of which questions should go into which category. Thereafter they discussed their assessments and discussed the questions that had ended up in different categories until they reached a consensus. In order to get as fair an assessment as possible David then made a critical reading of the sorting. In the instances where the initial assessment differed from David’s we discussed until we reached a consensus. The last step resulted in the moving of some questions from the feasible category, and we have strived to err on the side of a more critical evaluation in order to lessen the impact of a subconscious bias towards wanting to see a clear progression.

Through the hand ins, and the take-home exam, we have data from two terms, that we have chosen to combine into three data-sets, from hand in one, hand in two and the take-home exam, in order to get a unified analysis. Since the students were given at least two sets of sources to work with at each hand in and not all students submitted at every occasion the amount of questions differs between the data sets.6 The take-home exam is comparable, in that the main assignment was to pose an expanded question to one of the source materials, but it also differs in that the students only posed one question and in a slightly larger falling off in submitted exams. While it stands to reason that students that have been given space to practise a

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5 This is described in more detail in Andrés Brink Pinto & David Larsson Heidenblad, “Vad vill vi att studenterna ska kunna göra? Avtäckningsmodellen i praktiken” in Hege Markussen & Katarina Mårtensson (eds.), Proceedings från Humanistiska och teologiska fakulteternas pedagogiska inspirationskonferens 2018 (Lund: Mediaryck, 2019).

6 N is 36 for the first hand in, 41 for the second hand in and 24 for the take-home exam.
certain skill in a learning environment with formative assessment should improve, some of the falling off could be explained by students being the furthest from reaching the desired learning goals abstain from turning in the exam – thereby sparing themselves from being failed. It is also important to note that the students had a full week to work on the exam and that they knew that the exam counted significantly towards their grade. In other words, it is highly plausible that most students put in more time and effort to the exam in comparison to the hand ins.

Results

Through our assessment we have identified two groups of questions, based upon their quality. The first group consist of questions that clearly falls in the category of not feasible as historical questions. This group can be further broken down in subgroups, that of course aren’t as clear cut as a neat taxonomy might imply. One common theme is questions that purely test reading comprehension, such as "what is the definition of Folkhemmet in Per Albin Hansson’s speech". Another is the invitation to pure speculation or the personal opinion on a source, such as "why do you think that Hansson made his speech" or "what do you think about the Folkhem". Lastly the group also include questions that are too big to be answerable by a confined study of the given sources, such as "how did the first generation of social democratic reformers in power relate to earlier utopian thinkers". While these questions are quite bad given the assignment, it is easy to see how some students chose to emulate earlier experiences when faced with a new and perhaps uncertain assignment. Indeed, we have all posed similar questions as study questions to course literature, and it seems plausible that many students also come into higher education well acquainted with answering of similar types of questions.

The second group consists of feasible questions, given the nature of the assignment and place within the program when the course takes place. This group includes questions that range from borderline feasible to perfectly adequate. They are all narrow in scope, in that these questions are possible to answer by only using the given sources. Most also have some kind of source critical evaluation of the given sources as a basis, where the students identify the kind of source they work with and sometimes also goes through the classic source-critical criteria, thereby generating some basic historical questions. The better questions often tend to include some kind of comparative approach between different sources, this is especially apparent in the exam, and some also show originality in using the sources to pose questions that we as teachers hadn’t thought about. Furthermore, the best of these questions also makes use of the course literature in some way. This can be in the form of contextualisation, that is making sense of the source by situating it within an historical context. It can also be by taking a perspective, theoretical model or method from the literature as a way to generate a relevant historical question. The most ambitious questions sketch out possible different approaches based upon a comparison of different authors within the course literature. Moreover, some students demonstrate the ability to reflect upon the practice of posing scientific questions, as well as the difference between historical sources and the course literature.

Analysis

A presented in the graphs below we can see a trend towards an increase in feasible questions over the course, especially when comparing the hand-in assignments and the take-home exam. It is also worth pointing out that most of the questions that were too big in relation to the given source materials would have functioned just fine as study questions towards the course literature. This points towards the feasibility of our chosen model in order to increase student skill. We especially would like to point out the fact that the model allowed us to combine constructive alignment and formative assessment as an integral part of our teaching probably also is part of the larger part of feasible questions in the take-home exam.
**Concluding remarks**

An unintended side effect of our project has been that we have started to establish a common disciplinary language to discuss our own practices of teaching. We would especially like to point towards the fruitfulness of in-depth discussions of what constitutes a feasible question, with a shared obligation towards explaining and qualifying our reasoning. By focusing on student skills, we have also been able to visualize our shared (and sometimes divergent) norms of what constitutes good history.