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How can history teachers respond to post-truth?

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Abstract

History teachers currently grapple with the impact of misinformation and political polarisation on their discipline. The concerns about these two factors have become more prominent as forms of inequality have widened significantly in the wake of responses to COVID-19. These shifts have taken place at around the same time as an authoritarian-leaning trend has begun to develop, which is underpinned by the assumption that historical and moral decline might be arrested by a sudden and radical shift in policy and leadership (Bufachi, 2020; Consentino, 2020; Daniel, 2024). These macro-factors have been broadly categorised as post-truth conditions, since they contribute to increased centralisation of authority over political and cultural knowledge, thereby causing a fragmented identity to develop in the rest of the societies where these developments eventuate. To address these circumstances, the core question addressed in this Miniature is: How can teachers integrate historical consciousness as part of teaching and learning, to respond to post-truth? The first section will contextualise post-truth conditions, while the second will sketch the curriculum context, and a third will suggest how historical consciousness might be applied using a literacy focus, as part of mapping elements to a teaching context in New South Wales, Australia.

Keywords

historical consciousness, post-truth, curriculum, pedagogy, history education

A recent (post-truth) history of co-opting terms

Post-truth has been linked with factors that facilitate the spread of misinformation, destabilise socio-political cohesion (McIntyre, 2017; Forroughi et al., 2019), exacerbate forms of inequality (Lewandowsky et al., 2017), and forms of epistemological crisis (Barzilai & Chinn, 2020). In an American context, the playwright Steve Tesich penned a polemic op-ed which took aim at the sanitised reporting and misleading government messaging about the nature of the Gulf War. He critiqued the lack of footage that implicated American troops in violence, and labelled it as a reaction to what he called “Vietnam Syndrome” (Tesich, 1992, p. 13) where public assumptions about America’s superpower status was unassailable, except in cases where a conflict was likely to continually be extended. Additionally, in public messaging, foes were characterised as enemies of democracy and freedom, so to characterise the USA as a defender of these ideas. He argued that on the basis of a deliberate mismatch between events, reporting and public knowledge, such claims about America’s role in the world could no longer be made with much veracity. This focus on deception and misinformation was taken up – independently – by the Australian

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philosopher Jeff Malpas (1992) at roughly the same time. He focussed instead on ideological and political impacts of post-modernity, in terms of mechanics involved in post-modern treatments of historical reality, particularly in the cases of Holocaust denial, (then) rewritings of histories by former Soviet states to reflect a localised perspective, and potential re-emergences of Nazism.

In the wake of COVID-19 lockdowns, definitions of post-truth have shifted to focus on forms of disruption to socio-political cohesion. Examples have included the absence of shared and individual responsibility in addressing existential threats (Coper, 2022; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; McIntyre, 2018), a zeitgeist of crisis (Barzilai & Chinn, 2020), and the notion that a sudden pivot in leadership, policies, and style of government in a democracy will expedite threats (Foroughi et al., 2019). Post-truth has also been used to refer to the enactment of political power and control, overriding any motive of common good or "truth" (Fuller, 2018, p. 3). This political emphasis is characterised by a slide away from democratic dialogue (Hannon, 2023), to ratcheting aggressive rhetoric of authoritarian-posturing, populist strongmen-style leaders (Consentino, 2020; Forroughi et al., 2019; Harsin, 2020; Kalaycı, 2022; McIntyre, 2018; Pomerantzev, 2019).

Post-truth figures in terms how members of a community are encouraged (while others are discouraged) in socio-political engagement, particularly in cases where there is a clear political hierarchy. In literature pertaining to post-truth one of the more cited examples was in relation to a quote attributed to Karl Rove – a senior advisor in the Bush Administration – in 2004, and has been re-cited several times ever since (e.g. Weinger, 2011; Schonfeld, 2017; Palma, 2021). In response to a belligerent media interview about the onset of the War in Iraq, he purportedly responded off camera with:

> People like you are still living in what we call the reality-based community. You believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality. That's not the way the world really works anymore. We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you are studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors, and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do (Pomerantzev, 2016, citing Suskind, 2004).

Following this logic, there is little acknowledgement that needs to be given by politicians, for those who appear as supporters for figureheads who have spearheaded different campaigns. Just as socio-economic inequalities separate rich from poor, an aspect of post-truth involves the segregation of individuals who are empowered by political structures being segregated from those who they disempower (cf. Fuller, 2018).

In the Australian context (which will be explored in more detail with the next section), recent public uses of post-truth have linked the concept with misinformation, and the production of political narratives designed to dissuade critical engagement by citizens. Such characteristics were evident when the voting population of this country were given a proposal (Referendum) that there be a panel of Indigenous advisors, to represent different localities and groups about Government measures. The proposal was designed to address a key omission in the Australian Constitution: The lack of recognition for Indigenous peoples. It was during the ensuing campaign that then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Linda Burney, used the two terms interchangeably with regard to how so-called evidence cited by the No campaign was frequently manufactured, during the 2023 Voice to Parliament Referendum in Australia (Butler, 2023; Cf. Beck, 2023; Graham, 2024). In the case of indecision, prospective voters were told by the Opposition Leader, Peter Dutton: "If you don't know, vote no" (Biddle et al., 2023, p. 38). Where there was any doubt about the claims or evidence to support them, it follows that critique or questioning was discouraged, rather than building a better understanding about the circumstances surrounding the Referendum. The proportion of votes for against-in favour was 60.1 percent and 39.9 percent, respectively.

What is the curriculum context?

The current curriculum documents in an Australian context are drawn from a national statement, the Alice Springs (Mpartwe) Declaration, which articulates a vision for an education that is predicated on values of equity and equality of opportunity for everyone who completes formal and informal schooling (2019). Educational frameworks drawn from this document attempt to enable students to be active and engaged contributors to their communities. In New South Wales, the writing context for this article, each syllabus features a section that outlines the rationale of the subject, followed by a short statement about how learning is relevant to post-school contexts. For History that is taught to 12-16 year old students, it appears as follows:

> The History 7–10 Syllabus provides students with the opportunity to study Aboriginal Cultures and Histories by investigating the oldest living, continuous cultures in the world. It also provides broader insights into the historical experiences of different cultural groups within our global society to develop an understanding of the shared history that has shaped Australia. Through the study of history students learn civics and citizenship, which form the basis for Australia's free, democratic and egalitarian society (NESA, 2024).

As part of this rationale, historical consciousness is defined as "...enabling students to locate themselves in the continuum of human experiences." The above extract shows that this focus on a continuum involves integrating "Aboriginal Cultures and Histories", and other enduring cultures, which are cultivated by way of historical thinking skills, that are linked with the political literacy of civics and citizenship. In scholarship terms, these observations align with Rüsen's emphasis on "testing [the] validity of case studies" by applying "general rules from specific examples" (2005, p. 31). This frame is sketched in terms of history being used as a vehicle for promoting ideas and behaviours associated with active citizenship in Australia more broadly (Sharp & Parkes, 2023). This purpose aligns closely with Nathalie Popa's (2023) and Peter Seixas' (2016) definitions of how historical consciousness can be operationalised in school curriculum, by reconstructing the past based on fragmentary or retrospective constructions. That being said, these alignments suggest that there is a dependence on teacher expertise to bridge the gap between theory and practice. As there is no reference to the scholarship explicitly in the curriculum documents (except for a reference list that exists separately) teacher knowledge of historical consciousness will likely need to be addressed in future professional development, due to this concept being a new inclusion in the curriculum documents.

An additional element of the curriculum is the expectation that knowledge and skills linked with history will be acquired via moving from simple to complex content, following Jerome Bruner's spiral curriculum model (1960). As such, there is the implicit assumption that teachers will design their sequences of learning for each unit of work, around key ideas that drive and shape history, allowing students to apply their analytical skills to increasingly complex sources, scenarios and debates. The language of these documents are aligned with The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (2019), so the documents from New South Wales will – like other jurisdictions – enable members of Australian communities to build social cohesion, by way of shared understandings to be "active and informed members of their communities" (AERO, 2024, p. 8), as well as having a curriculum that mandates a set of shared understandings about how modern Australia came to exist.

The curriculum structure indicates that although there is an expectation to develop historical consciousness locally, the relationships with the past which emerge are framed within a values-based national identity, of a "free, democratic and egalitarian society" (NESA, 2024). Active and informed participation lies at the heart of this. There are several exclusions around what active and informed participation looks like, particularly with the selective inclusion of such forms of Indigenous Knowledge as Deep Time (Westaway et al., 2024). Such shifts are significant, because it echoes concerns that have been expressed by Peter Brett (2022) amongst others, that the assumption that the curriculum will provide models of participation, when the content being delivered does not live up to this aspiration (cf. Heggart et al., 2018 for reflections on a previous Australian curriculum program, Discovering Democracy). The importance of these considerations is demonstrated in Kenneth Nordgren (2019) pointing out that it is an opportunity for broadening the scope of history beyond human perspectives. In this lens, operationalising historical consciousness in classrooms needs to involve teachers asking questions about what shapes "historical narratives, as well as [demonstrating] an openness to letting the present and the future impose new requirements on the past" (Nordgren, 2019, p. 794). The expectation therefore, is that teachers cultivate personalised and communal relationships with the past which ready students to see the value in skills to investigate other perspectives; it is not to create the next generation of historians.

Framed within a more global context, Andreas Körber contends that the integration of historical consciousness affords the opportunity for comparative approaches to history education, between "non-Western" and "Western" but not in terms of "non-modern ... incomplete, inferior or else" (Körber, 2016, p. 447). For Peter Seixas' Canadian perspective, it was a crucial part of practicing history democratically, as it involves "individuals comprehending the historicity of their own circumstances, the mutability of their identities and the contingency of their traditions" (Seixas, 2016, p. 3). Such observations are essential for linking conceptions of historical consciousness in Australian curriculum documents (such as those listed in the previous sec-

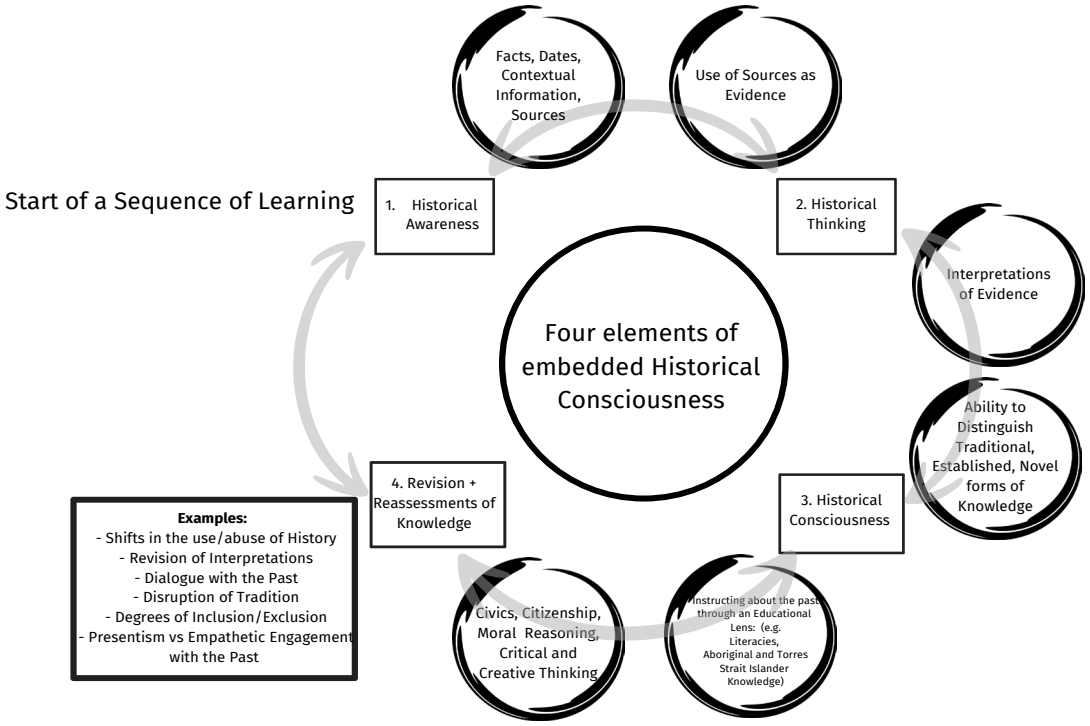
tion) with other cultures. Heather Sharp and Robert Parkes have noted for instance that in the current national curriculum, outside of the mainstream of "White Australia", other groups are largely relegated to the "periphery of Australian culture and identity — engaging in civic life and being featured in Australian history only when they are exotic ..." (Sharp & Parkes, 2023, p. 193).

How does this theory translate into practice?

This section provides ideas for teaching and learning in a localised level, starting with mapping criteria and intended outcomes of learning sequences, that can be used to evaluate student learning (following Drake & Reid, 2018). Since the scope of the curriculum is to engage with historical consciousness in a manner that addresses localised circumstances, such engagement with the past could be crafted to work against post-truth conditions that were identified in the first section. Figure 1 shows what such considerations might look like as part of a teaching and learning cycle that gradually develops complexity of ideas. Table 1 on the other hand, shows how practices might work in a commonly studied case study in Australia (World War II and the Battle of Singapore).

Figure 1 shows how historical consciousness might be integrated as part of a teaching and learning cycle that develops in its complexity. In their delivery, modes of teaching usually focus on delivering foundational content and skills first, to cultivate historical awareness, while more sophisticated analytical skills linked with historical thinking gradually becomes more autonomous with guided, then independent opportunities to practice (in line with the increasing complexity between the two outlined in: Ankersmit, 2001; Ahonen, 2005). Relationships with the past cultivated through historical consciousness are more intrinsic and relate to how individuals, groups, and communities connect to the past. Cultivating such connections requires substantial amounts of engagement with the subject before teachers' and students' grasp of it can begin to be understood and assessed in a schooling context. The steps between each of these aspects of understanding the past represent the details that would be used to introduce additional layers of complexity. The last segment about revision is where change is recognised as required to address controversial elements of history that are no longer valid in the face of source material, changing ways of interpreting the past, or the use of technology which disrupts traditional assumptions. The diagram is therefore organised by forms of relationships with the past, rather than a hierarchy.

Figure 1: Historical consciousness configured as part of a teaching and learning cycle.



The purpose of Table 1 is to deconstruct elements of historical consciousness so teaching and learning strategies can be aligned with this central concept. The structure is adapted from the epistemic framework developed by Sarit Barzilai and Clark Chinn (2018), to create a more specific alignment with the goal of integrating historical consciousness in a manner that respects the curriculum requirements and historical inquiry methods. This paper was part of a more extended body of research where they elaborate on methods of diagnosing post-truth conditions (Barzilai and Chinn, 2020), and what roles educators have in addressing these. A key element of their findings was the significance of epistemic alignment, to provide clarity of the ideas, concepts, knowledge and skills and ensure learnings remain both transferrable between contexts yet in keeping with term educational goals.

The examples that have been selected focus on commemoration about World War II, to develop historical consciousness by engaging with experiences of Australian soldiers in Darwin (northern Australia) and Singapore. These points have been tailored to topic areas in the History curriculum that are widely taught. This conflict relates to both a compulsory junior curriculum for 15-16 year olds as mandated content, are situated in a senior curriculum for Modern History, and relate to the largest global conflict that has directly effected Australia. As historical consciousness is by definition non-linear (Popa, 2021) the delivery is intended to be flexible and Table 1 is structured to allow purposeful teaching that cultivates specific elements of historical consciousness. These guidelines allow for teachers' delivery to accommodate a key difficulty that is linked to operationalising historical consciousness: its variation is due to localised relationships with the past (see for instance, Seixas, 2016; Körber, 2016; Clark and Peck, 2018), and there is contention about whether it is a European concept that has been mapped onto different contexts, or a species-wide trait (Seixas, 2016; Nordgren, 2019).

Currently, a key challenges is to integrate literacy instruction into history education contexts, while keeping the focus on discipline-specific knowledge and skills. Currently this priority is outlined in the Rationale section of the syllabus. Table 1 is the integration of a literacy-focus following recommendations from a recent literature review (Wilson et al., 2023). Two elements in particular feature as part of the Table to guide its effectiveness:

- Deconstruction – critical analysis of historical sources to ascertain context, audience, message; purpose of source creation and perspective represented; techniques used to communicate the message, purpose and perspective of a historical source.
- Reconstruction – interpretation, reasoning and explanation of historical evidence; analysis and synthesis of evidence and historical argument; analysis and reasoning leading to a judgement expressed as an assessment of value or an evaluation based on criteria (Wilson et al., 2023, p. 3).

The connection between historical consciousness and a literacy focus in New South Wales, Australia, can be clarified by elaborating on the research of Nathalie Popa. Her research is working on how to operationalise historical consciousness, by cultivating a combination of "disciplinary and everyday habits of mind" and "... a sense of historical being (to make sense of their own place in, or a sense of belonging to, a constructed historical continuum)" (Popa, 2023, p. 143). These considerations are aligned with the rationale of the New South Wales syllabus from the first section of this article; Table 1 incorporates historical experiences from groups who were not given much public voice during World War II (in this case, Ada Joyce Bridges representing nurses, and Frederick Prentice for Indigenous soldiers). The table does not need to be followed in order, and is designed to give examples for how classroom practices in a high school context might be implemented to cultivate historical consciousness.

Table 1: Planning considerations for integrating aspects of historical consciousness.

Aspects of applying historical consciousness	**Learning intention**	**Sample planning considerations (phrased as inquiry questions)**	**Task ideas**
1. Establishing general rules from specific examples in history, before testing their validity by applying them to other case studies (Rüsen, 2005, p. 31)	Filter ideas about what is important to enquiring into an area of history	• Locate a source/site. • Provide a semi-contextualised version to students. • What is its significance to a community? • Who is it significant for?	• Create a Digital Collage (such as using Lucidspark) of images; • The class then annotates them for the (1) location, (2) how visible the memorial is, (3) what lies around it, (4) who/what is being commemorated • Provide the class with a list of sources/sites; They develop a short presentation that poses questions about why the site should be kept. • Scenario: The local council is discussing the removal or replacement of the memorial. What are some steps that could be taken to find out what significance it has to the local community?
2. Generalised and Abstract Knowledge, is distinguished from – and mapped across – to localised examples (Popa references these elements, 2023)	Determine the focus of time / place / individual / group that will be enquired about Make connections between a school's local area and a larger-scale event	• What was taking place in the school's local area at the time of the conflict being studied? • What factors bridge the contexts between objects from the past and people in the present?	• Use a Bloom's Cube to map how a local site is investigated, such as cenotaphs, Veterans Associations/Returned Servicemen Leagues (RSLs), cemeteries. The six components should include tasks that shift from identify to create/evaluate and can be completed in any order the student chooses. • For a group PBL, (such as investigating a veteran), tasks might borrow from Museum Design Principles: (1) Smithsonian Institute's Types of Visitors can be used to allocate students to functions within a group: – Ideas: Visitors seeking conceptual and abstract thinking – People: Visitors seeking emotional connections – Objects: Visitors seeking visual language and aesthetics – Physical: Visitors seeking multi-sensory experiences (2) Steps involved in Museums Victoria's One Object, Big Story initiative (including exemplars): https://museumsvictoria.com.au/learning/small-object-big-story/

3. Narrative (Popa, 2023) and accounts that are either fragmentary or retrospective constructions of the past (Seixas, 2016, p. 432)	Justify: (1) type of sources that are being consulted, (2) explanation or analysis that is being taken to inform an effective, informed judgement	• How is the past being framed? • What are the uses and functions of history being learned about? • Which mode is being used to articulate the engagement with history (e.g. story, non-linear)	Guide activities that address this aspect of historical consciousness by indicating two features: – Thematic designs for museum exhibits include: curiosity, challenge, narratives and participation (following Skydsgaard et al., 2016). – Exhibits that preserve the memory of individuals in history consider: Analysis of Artefacts, Biographies, Types of Presentation, Representing Perspectives of Individual, Family, Community, State/Nation Use a structure of providing a: • narrative (such as introducing a class by telling a story through a visualising activity); • challenge (posing ambiguities, questions, or aspects that need more information); • participation (answering questions/completing a series of tasks based on core themes/ideas of commemoration, such as investigating individuals' participation in armed conflict); • curiosity (posing inquiry, next steps that feed into the design of the following class). • Students are provided with a Document Based Study, or a sample of sources from a Museum exhibit (such as the Commemoration of Bukhit Chandu in Singapore being linked with the impact of the Opium Trade on the Malay and Chinese populations).
4. Points of Similarity, Contestability and Difference that are present between historical interpretations (Chapman, 2011; Seixas, 2016, p. 435; Popa, 2023)	Establish the criteria for the what/how of ambiguities in the enquiry.	• What else needs to be explored? • What ambiguities have arisen from interpreting the past?	Construct a class debate that tests the degree of agreement/disagreement with assumptions about memorials, such as: • *Dedications, plaques and headstones never change.* • *Memorials represent veterans in their best light, that glosses over any flaws.* • *Messages to society from memorials show how people should aspire to be.* Case Studies could include commemorations of: Individuals: • *Ada Joyce Bridges (at Scone, Kranji, Radji Beach, in the AGNSW's collections – she is commemorated in substantially different ways at each)* • *Petty Officer Hajime Toyoshima (at Cowra's Garden of Friendship, in Darwin's Aviation Museum, in the AWM online archives)* • *Indigenous Australian WWI Veteran Frederick Prentice, who was only given proper dedications at Adelaide Cemetery in 2021 (Lacey, 2021).* Events: • *Signing of Singaporean Surrender to the Japanese* • *Signing of Japanese Surrender to the Allies* *These are shown in a variety of ways, such as at the Old Ford Factory in Singapore, and re-enactments through Wax Exhibits in Fort Siloso's Surrender Chambers.* Collectives: • *Singaporean Memorial to Civilians/Missing*

5. Clarify conceptual definitions that guide practices, and reflect on the validity to to varieties of perspectives and sources (Seixas, 2016, p. 434; Popa, 2023).	Such practices can be extended across different scales. Preventing any of micro/meso/macro and localised/regional/national/international factors taking priority over one another.	• What conclusions can be arrived at about the inquiry topic? • What versions of history are being told? Which are being excluded? • Is the scope of inquiry too small/large, specific/generalised? • What are sources for future inquiries?	• What is the history of the school in relation to the conflict? If the school was not founded, what links does the town/suburb/city/region have with the conflict? • Compare Darwin Aviation Museum's preservation of the Japanese Zero with the Peace Garden at Cowra. • Provide annotations of Brazier and Inglis' Sacred Places (2008, p. 1); Their verdicts on the purposes-influences of commemoration might be compared with David Stephens' (2008) review of the book. • Provide annotations of Clark's (2017, p. 1-3) Unfinished business: Rewriting the Past. The key questions should enable students to link details in the article about structures dedicated to memorials and commemoration, with their own experience of the events and people they are representing

Conclusions and future research

Conditions linked with post-truth have made aligning theory with practice more significant, as it clarifies the intentions, processes, and applications students will translate their learning to. With the inclusion of historical consciousness in the new curriculum, this adjustment is an opportunity to be innovative in how teaching and learning of this concept is framed in local contexts. When deconstructed into its various elements, historical consciousness can act as a core that guides students' relationship with historical concepts and content, thereby increasing the likelihood that students will be able to view the skills as meaningful in contexts outside the classroom. For teachers it offers considerations about what conceptual ingredients need to be incorporated as part of best practice. Future research might elaborate on these alignments, such as investigating how this organisation of history curriculum impacts students' academic achievement, as well as fostering their relationship with history (such as Popa, 2022; Zarmati and Nally, 2023). These applications of analytical skills will be crucial in building capacities to detect forms of misinformation, by understanding the provenance of source materials to inform more nuanced analyses.

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