



Professional Learning
Research
Innovation

Learning in Practice

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About the Barker Institute:

- Provides a centre for research, reflective practice, professional learning and innovation in education
- Is a resource hub that facilitates the ongoing development of learning for teachers, allowing them to stay abreast of emerging practice, constantly striving to refine the quality of teaching and learning
- Looks to develop collaborative ventures with other institutions and providers, initiating research and innovation combined with the implementation of new projects and programs for the benefit of students, staff and the broader community
- Shares current research and issues with parents, professional bodies and educators around the globe through ongoing symposia, forums, lectures and conferences

About the Learning in Practice Journal:

As a leader in Christian education, Barker College aims to both demonstrate and inform best practice. This journal was developed to showcase a range of initiatives and research projects from across the School. It explains the rationale behind innovations in practice and archives pivotal developments in Barker's academic, co-curricular and pastoral realms.

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Abstract

At its heart, history is an argument. It involves generating an inquiry worth pursuing, researching divergent accounts of the past, developing a thesis and substantiating it with evidence. In my History classes, we have been using various approaches to hone the art of the argument by deciding on and defending issues of significance, conducting debates, putting historical figures on trial and using a spectrum to make judgements. An aim of these activities is to ensure an argument becomes the foundation of students' written work. However, learning to make reasoned arguments also has intrinsic value as a touchstone of a democratic society.

The Art of the Argument

The genesis of an argument lies with a question. It is appropriate that a teacher develops questions that will assist students to make judgements about the past. It is perhaps more beneficial that students have the opportunity to develop their own questions. Hence, in my Year 11 Modern History class, after a number of weeks studying the Romanovs, students were required to develop and answer a question about the Romanovs that we had not yet explored. Developing these questions was instructive in itself as it enabled students to understand how to pursue an astute line of inquiry. The topic was not the key to generating meaningful research, the question was. As Grossman notes, "Having abandoned two generations ago the notion that legitimate historical inquiry focuses mainly on high diplomacy, ideas, politics, and culture, we now tell our students that any subject can be an object of useful research. *What matters is less the propriety of the topic than the acuity of the question* [my emphasis]" (2015).

In order to respond to a question and develop theories about the past, students need to conduct research. Arguments are never conducted for the argument's sake. Instead, they are developed to draw sound conclusions based on where the weight of the evidence lies. It is one of the great boons of thinking historically that it trains a student not to make uniformed claims, but to research and consider multiple strands of thought before deciding on a point of view. Indeed, "the fact that any historian worth his salt reached conclusions based on the evidence found, rather than reaching a conclusion and then searching for evidence to support it, seemed to be one of the strengths that marked doing History out as being a very worthwhile activity" (Randall, 1999). When my Year 11 students conducted research on the Romanovs, they were encouraged and assisted wherever possible to consider divergent views found in contemporary and recent accounts, among Russian and Western historians, among supporters and critics of the Tsar. Analysis of contrasting accounts allowed students to appreciate the fact that history involves contention and interpretation, and that some accounts were more trustworthy than others. This assisted them to make their own judgements.

Establishing a strong thesis statement enables students to develop and structure an argument. A thesis statement could be the observation that 'Alexei's haemophilia contributed significantly to the fall of the Tsar'. A strong thesis statement could be the claim that 'Alexei's haemophilia contributed significantly to the fall of the Tsar because it took his focus away from the business of ruling.' This thesis is better because it posits a claim, is able to be extended and defended and inspires further thought or even counter-claims. Based on careful analysis of the research, a thesis statement needs to be supported by evidence. Evidence should, in fact, both fuel and furnish an argument. This is not a static process. Students should always have the opportunity to revise their stance as they continue to discover, analyse and interpret the evidence.

The final stage in the development of an argument is its delivery. In my Year 11 class, I allowed students to present the fruits of their inquiry about the Romanovs as they saw fit. The important aspect was not the trappings of an entertaining presentation (although delivery is not unimportant), as much as it was the validity and substance of the argument. Students were also subject to questions from their peers to test the depth of their understanding and enable them to change their mind based on challenges to their position.

The Argument in a History Classroom

The development of an argument in such a prescribed manner does not always happen in a History classroom. However, activities that help students construct arguments do.

A regular feature of our History classrooms are discussions of significance. In order to determine significance, students need to make judgements and consider other points of view. A way of equipping students to do this is to ask them to select or rank events according to their significance, to defend their decision and to change their position if necessary:

- When my Year 10 class examined the rights and freedoms of indigenous Australians, I asked them to consider the fundamental significance of the 1967 Referendum. I listed four possible options and asked students to hold up the number of fingers that corresponded to the option they had chosen. They were required to justify their choice to the class and, after listening to the arguments made by other students, could revise their selection.
- My Year 12 Modern History students explored the power struggle between Stalin and Trotsky for control of the USSR. We made a list of reasons for Stalin's success and I asked students to choose the one they believed was most significant. We listed the four reasons most students identified and those who were prepared to defend a reason stood together in one corner of the room. Each 'corner' had the opportunity to persuade others of their point of view. At the end of the activity, students could move to the corner that was most convincing.

Debates can be used to further students' understanding of significance. They can also equip students to make judgements beyond significance as they debate issues of effectiveness, responsibility, justice and motivation.

- In Year 11 Modern History we studied the contentious origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict. We looked at a timeline of occupation and read various claims to the land of Israel so that we could have an informed debate about whether the Arabs, Jews or an external power had more right to this territory. This prompted discussion about what constituted

a valid claim and helped students to understand that ingrained and incompatible views prolonged the conflict.

- In Year 12 Modern History, we utilised debates frequently to decide whether the Treaty of Versailles was too harsh, whether War Was Communism was introduced in the USSR for practical or ideological reasons, whether Lenin, Stalin or the secret police was most responsible for the terror that gripped the USSR in the 1930s, whether the decisions in the Nuremberg Trials that followed World War Two were justified or victor's justice. These debates were particularly useful for students who would need to develop and substantiate written arguments under time pressure.

Putting historical characters on trial was another method I used to enable students to develop arguments about the past. These trials assisted students to rely on evidence to prosecute or defend the actions of particular individuals. They also compelled the students to understand that an argument depends on perspective and context:

- As a culminating activity at the conclusion to our study of JFK, four of my Year 10 History students were asked to assume the characters of LBJ, Dulles, Castro and Khrushchev to be put on trial for JFK's assassination. The focus here was not on the classic question of 'Who killed JFK?' but on what motivations these men would have to arrange the assassination in the context of a powerful CIA and an entrenched Cold War. Other students played the part of eyewitnesses, prosecution team, defence team, judge and jury. After listening to the conflicting accounts, to historical evidence, condemnations and justifications, the jury decided who was ultimately responsible for JFK's demise.

Debates and trials push students in many instances to assume a pre-determined point of view. There are other approaches that enable students to see judgements as malleable and nuanced, including the use of a spectrum. A spectrum gives students a visual understanding of the nature of arguments beyond the black and white.

- In Year 11 Modern History, we overtly consider the usefulness and reliability of sources. When we studied the origins of the Arab-Israeli conflict, I distributed a variety of sources from various perspectives and contexts and asked students to stand on a spectrum to indicate how useful and reliable each source was. Students were asked to justify their position on the spectrum, they could adjust their position after reflection and discussion, and they could visually see that judgements about evidence could differ and still be defensible.

The Value of an Argument

"History is an argument, often very forceful and divisive. But that is how the pursuit of history advances and why it is also such a civilising activity... robust argument is the lifeblood of a free society and it should be encouraged." (Lay, 2011)

People with vested interests have long distorted and exploited the past for political purposes. We might be tempted to think that this is a mark only of dictatorial states, but it is a danger in democracies as well. As Nougayrede explains, "we worry rightly about the impact of fake news, but today's nationalist passions are even more deeply rooted in the distortion of history, which citizens in many countries lap up despite the fact it is poison." (2017). Our students of History have the opportunity to understand that arguments can be worth

pursuing, they can be anchored in evidence, they can undermine baseless assertions, they can provoke thought and they can be revised. Reasoned arguments might just be a very valuable gift they can give to our society.

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