

Beyond 'bias' and subjectivity? Developing 16-19 year old students' understandings of historical interpretations through online inter-institutional discussion

Arthur Chapman^(*)

Abstract: There is widespread agreement amongst history educators that history education should aim to help students understand and explore multiple perspectives on the past. However, as an important body of international research and theorizing indicates, understanding historical interpretations and accounts can present significant challenges for history students and, indeed, for adults. This paper draws on empirical, theoretical and pedagogic work and, in particular, on data sets developed through online discussion exercises involving 16-19 year old history students, academic historians and an history education academic in discussion about historical interpretations. The paper explores empirical questions about how these students appeared to conceptualize historical interpretations over the course of these discussion exercises and about the extent to which student thinking appeared to change, if at all, during the discussions. The paper also explores the impact that challenging questioning strategies and interaction with expert historical thinkers can have in moving student thinking on.¹

1. Should we teach students about interpretations of the past and, if so, why?

Many answers have been offered to the question 'What is school history for?' in history education and other literatures². A range of answers have been offered in practice also, as Wilschut (2010) has shown in a discussion of the history of history education in three European countries, including approaches to school history that understand it as a vehicle for developing:

- national identity / citizenship
- international identity / global citizenship
- historical consciousness / understanding of history as a discipline
- social science / generic investigative and critical skills

^(*)Reader in Education, Edge Hill University, St Helens Road, Ormskirk, Lancashire, L39 4QP, United Kingdom. Email: arthur.chapman@edgehill.ac.uk

¹ I would like to thank Dr Katharine Burn, Professor Eric Evans, Lukas Perikleous and Dr Robert Poole for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² See, for example, von Borries, 2009; Barton, 2009; Lee, 2010; Lee, et al., 1992; Tosh, 2008.

I do not propose to attempt to adjudicate between these possible answers to the question ‘What is school history for?’ here. It seems to me that all of these aims can have a role to play in the history curriculum and that they are not necessarily incompatible. However, as a number of authors have argued (for example, Wineburg, 2001 and 2007) there is no alternative, if we want students to take what they learn in their history lessons seriously *as knowledge*, other than to focus a large part of our efforts as history educators on developing students’ understanding of the discipline of history.

Plural interpretations of the past abound in the contemporary world and multiple and often conflicting representations of the past are a persistent feature of contemporary national and global politics and culture (Samuel, 1994; Lowenthal, 1985, 1998; Wertsch, 2002). Histories change as the present changes (Danto, 2007) and an increase in academic research into the past tends to lead to an increase rather than a decrease in the number and range of differing interpretations of the past (Ankersmit, 1994). Understanding history – as a discipline and in its popular cultural and political forms – clearly involves developing an understanding of historical interpretation, of how historical interpretations work and why historical interpretations of different kinds arise. Research findings from a number of countries suggest that such understandings are often counter-intuitive, that everyday preconceptions about the nature of knowledge can impede students’ understanding of historical interpretation and that developing such understandings involves challenging preconceptions that students are likely to bring to their historical studies (Barca, 2005; Boix-Mansilla, 2005; Gago, 2005; Hsiao, 2005; Lee, 1997, 1998, 2001; Lee & Shemilt, 2003, 2004; VanSledright, 2011).

There are good grounds for concluding, therefore, that if we want students to take history seriously and that if we want to empower students to cope effectively with persistent features of contemporary reality then we need to educate them to think in specifically historical ways about the interpretation of the past.

2. What difficulties arise when teaching about differing interpretations of the past? ³

Research suggests that students often hold tacit assumptions about how historical knowledge is produced, based on everyday ways of knowing and that these assumptions are likely to impede the development of their understanding of historical interpretation (Lee 1997, 1998, 2001; Lee & Shemilt, 2004).

³ The text that follows in this section depends heavily on Chapman 2010(a), pp. 97-99.

Students often assume:

- that the past has a fixed meaning;
- that historical interpretations should mirror this fixed meaning; and, therefore, that
- there ought, in principle, to be a singular and definitive account of the past (Lee & Shemilt, 2004; Shemilt, 2000).

Students who think in these ways tend to explain variation in interpretation in terms of subjectivity and ‘bias’ obstructing the process of knowing the past which they tend, also, to understand in terms of every day epistemologies modeled on direct experience and witness reports on experience.⁴ Consider the following example, taken from an interview with a 17 year old English student in which the student was asked to explain why differing interpretations of the past arise:

“Historians... weren’t around at the time... and they are basing what they do know on sources that have been written by past people who were around at the time and it is very debatable... how reliable they are and whether it is totally true or not and a historian can easily misinterpret something that is false to be true...”. (Cited in Chapman, 2009(b), p.174)

For this student historians begin at a disadvantage – they ‘weren’t around at the time’ and cannot have recourse to their own direct experience to ground knowledge claims about the past. Historians have, as a result, to rely on the testimony of those who ‘were around’ and had the opportunity to directly experience the past; however, such testimony is unreliable – witnesses may not report their experiences veridically and historians may, therefore, be misled by false or partial reports: it is unsurprising, therefore, to find multiple accounts of the past since multiple errors about the past are possible and, indeed, on this student's account of historical epistemology, inevitable. For this student, there is ‘a’ truth, in principle, and historians ought, if witnesses could be relied upon, to be able to piece it together by re-assembling it from the fragments contained in contemporary reports based on experience. Plural interpretations are a result of flaws in the process linked to the fact that some witnesses are unreliable in ways that we cannot fully know and to the fact that different historians will assess the reliability of witnesses differently.

Students often model subjectivity and bias as operating at the level of historical writing also, as in the following example, extracted from an 18 year old English student’s response to a written task asking for the student to explain why historical accounts might vary:

⁴ Atkinson refers to these epistemic assumptions as the ‘direct observation paradigm’ (1978).

“History is retrospective, we rely on reports and accounts from which we may interpret. It is often difficult to ascertain an author's views or obtain information about his social standing or political ideas. This means that an historical event or period often has differing accounts due to bias, which could be due to political views, personal experience or any number of other reasons. This means that historians today are faced with differing interpretations of the same account and so they must decide which is to be believed. But even modern historians are subject to bias over certain periods or events which may lead to different interpretations from different historians.” (Cited in Chapman, 2009(b), p.178)

For this student, when we seek to construct knowledge of the past we face the testimony problem that has just been described: historians must ‘rely on reports’ and ‘must decide which’ report ‘is to be believed’, and historians often lack the ability to determine which, if any, witness is in fact credible. The problem of witness bias is redoubled, however, since, for this student, historians are just as prone to distort what they see or hear as witnesses are, are themselves subjective and biased, and cannot necessarily be relied upon either.

The models of historical knowing implied by the examples of student thinking just cited undoubtedly have value – political and other biases certainly do have an impact on the ways in which the past is understood and represented (Evans, 1997). The underlying epistemology is, nevertheless, naïve and does not capture how historians construct knowledge. Generally speaking, historians do not construct accounts of the past simply by collating together true statements extracted from witness testimony and you cannot write history simply by ‘cutting and pasting’.

In fact, historians *actively construct* knowledge claims about the past, and, indeed, actively construct the past objects that they debate, by interrogating and interpreting the remains of the past that exist in the present (Collingwood 1994; Goldstein, 1976; Megill, 2007). The questions that historians ask shape the claims that historians make about the past. Historians read testimony and other forms of source material inferentially, contextually and subtextually as much as they read them literally and historians ask questions of and about their sources that often could not have been anticipated, let alone answered, by the people who created them (Wineburg, 1991).

Developing an adequate understanding of historical knowledge creation involves understanding that history is about the *active interrogation* of the remains of the past by historians and that history involves the *active construction* of knowledge claims about the past through historical argument about the meanings of traces from the past that remain in the present. Clearly, on this account, the outcomes of historical interrogation will be profoundly shaped by the ideas and presuppositions that historians start out with – these ideas and preconceptions, after all, shape the questions that historians ask, the issues that they consider significant, and so on. However, historical practice is not a one way street and understanding the traces of

the past involves dialogue and feedback loops: historians may start out with one question, for example, and then find that the source materials that they interrogate cause them to revise that question and begin again with a modified one (Megill, 2007).

Table 1 identifies some of the factors that are likely to be in play when historians set out to interpret the past, some of which are likely to play a part in any attempt to understand the past and all of which are likely to have an impact on disciplined historical knowing.

Table 1

Factors affecting historians' engagements with the traces of the past

- The claims that historical interpretations advance about the past are a function of:
- historians' orientation towards the past and understanding of what history is;
 - historians' purposes in engaging with the past;
 - historians' awareness and identification of traces of the past;
 - historians' decisions made about which traces have relevance to the issues they are interested in;
 - the questions that historians ask of the traces that they select for analysis;
 - the assumptions, concepts and methods that historians deploy as they interrogate and interpret these traces;
 - the forms in which historians express the answers to their questions.

Note. Adapted from Chapman (2010(a), p.98).

It is apparent from this list that engaging with the past is a highly complex process and one that is not sufficiently explained by the invocation of subjectivity or bias. Asking questions and answering them by conducting research involves making decisions. Factors such as subjectivity or bias can certainly shape decisions, of course, however, no matter how 'biased' or 'unbiased' an historian may be, there are still decisions to be made and one's understanding of research and knowledge construction is as sophisticated as one's understanding of those decisions (Chapman, 2011).

Although decisions are often made in subjective and motivated ways, to explain historical practice in terms of subjectivity is to miss a key point about it. Historical knowledge is constructed by communities with norms of practice and not by individuals (Megill, 2007). Historical knowledge claims are assessed in communities of practice against norms of practice and succeed or fail to the extent to which they conform to these norms. Individual historians are expected to make their

assumptions and the interpretive decisions that they have made transparent so that they can be scrutinised and evaluated by their peers (Grafton, 2003; Megill, 2007).

The remainder of this paper describes and evaluates aspects of an ongoing project – the History Virtual Academy (HVA) - that seeks to develop ‘Advanced Level’ (16-19 year old) students’ understanding of historical epistemology and historical interpretations and accounts. Data sets arising from this project are used as a means of exploring students’ conceptions of the process of decision making involved in constructing historical knowledge and as a means of exploring how students’ understandings develop through online discussion with practicing historians and with other students about conflicting interpretations.

3. The History Virtual Academy project 2007-2009: a case study in teaching and learning about differing interpretations

The History Virtual Academy project began as small scale Teaching Development Project supported by the History Subject Centre (HSC) of the British Higher Education Academy (HEA) in 2007 and that went through two iterations, in 2008 and 2009. The project is now entering a third iteration, in 2011, supported, again, by a HSC Teaching Development Grant and also by Edge Hill University.⁵

The project is ‘virtual’ in the sense that it takes place entirely online, through discussion boards embedded in university virtual learning environments. It is an academy in the sense that it aims to develop students’ understanding of an academic discipline and also in the sense that it involves school and college history students, in the final stages of their studies, in interaction with academic historians working in universities.

In 2008 the project involved fifteen students attending one school and one college, two historians and one education academic; and in 2009 the project involved 73 students in one school and two colleges, two historians and one education academic. The students involved in both academies were all in the final stages of their secondary education and were 17-19 years of age. All the students who took part in 2008 HVA and the majority of the students who took part in the 2009 HVA were academic ‘high achievers’ in the final year of their studies who were preparing for an Advanced Extension examination in history and who were studying history at Advanced Level.

The project had a number of aims including the following:

- to break down barriers between school history and university history and to promote dialogue between teachers, academic historians and history education academics;

⁵ I would like to take this opportunity to thank the participants in the iterations of the HVA analysed in this paper: Katy Allen, Head of History at Lancaster Girls Grammar School, Dr Jane Facey, Head of History at Esher College, and Judith Smith, Tutor in History at Godalming College, and their students, and Professor Eric Evans, of Lancaster University and Dr Robert Poole, Reader in History in the University of Cumbria.

- to provide opportunities for students to learn about historical interpretation through online interaction with academic historians;
- to provide opportunities for students in different institutions to discuss and debate historical interpretation with each other; and
- to generate research data sets that could be used to explore a number of issues, such as, centrally, what can be learned from these processes about student thinking about interpretations questions and how student thinking can be developed and advanced.

A preliminary analysis of the 2008 and 2009 HVAs, in which a small sample of the student data was analysed, has been published online (Chapman, 2009(a)). This paper is the first systematic analysis of aspects of the entire data set.⁶ As is explained further below, the project discussion boards provide data relating to student thinking about two issues – explaining why historical controversies arise and evaluating competing historical interpretations. This paper focuses on the data relating to students’ understandings of why conflicts of historical interpretation arise.

4. A summary of the HVA structures and tasks⁷

The 2008 HVA set out to develop and explore student thinking about historical interpretation by asking students to address two issues:

- explaining why historical interpretations vary and
- evaluating contrasting historical interpretations.

These issues were addressed by presenting students with two contrasting accounts of a group of English religious radicals from the mid-seventeenth century (the Ranters).⁸ These texts were chosen for a number of reasons and, not least, because they presented the students with a dramatic historical disagreement in which one historian described and characterised the Ranters and in which another historian argued that the Ranters were a ‘myth’. The students were asked to answer two questions about this conflict of interpretations, to explain why this disagreement may have arisen and to evaluate the conflicting interpretations. The explanatory question is relevant here and was phrased as follows:

⁶ An analysis of a small selection of some of the 2009 data was published in Chapman, 2011.

⁷ The description of the 2008 and 2009 HVAs in this section is necessarily brief. The structure and organization of these exercises is explained fully in Chapman, 2009(a), pp.11-33.

⁸ These texts are available in Chapman, 2009(a) at pages 84-86.

How might you explain the fact that these historians say such different things about the Ranters?

Students were asked to answer these questions, to give feedback to each other on the questions and to then rewrite their answers in the light of the feedback that they had received from their peers, from the moderator and from two academic historians. Individual students from different institutions were organised into pairs during this exercise and asked to provide feedback to each other. The exercise took place between March and April 2008 and lasted approximately four weeks. Table 2 outlines the structure more fully.

Table 2

The History Virtual Academy (HVA) Structure 2007-8

HVA Stage	Explanation
1. Historiography Task (1)	Students were asked to read two contrasting historical accounts and to answer two questions by making one post in answer to each question.
2. Academic feedback	Students received individual feedback on each question from participating academic historians.
3. Moderator feedback	The moderator posted generic feedback on both questions.
4. Peer feedback	Students were asked to make one post for each question to the other student in their group.
5. Historiography Task (2)	Students were asked to revisit their original posts and re-post answers to the two questions in the light of the feedback that they had received from each other and from academics and taking account of the guidance in the moderator feedback.
6. Academic feedback	Students received individual feedback on each question from participating academic historians.

Note. From Chapman (2009(a), p.13).

The 2009 virtual academy sought to build upon and improve the structure developed in 2008 and added two dimensions to it. Firstly, the students were asked to answer generic questions that asked them how they might explain historical disagreements and how they might evaluate conflicting accounts of the past. The explanatory question is relevant here and was phrased as follows:

Why do historians often come to differing conclusions about the past?

Students were then presented with historical documents relating to the Ranters and asked to debate the conclusions that could reasonably be drawn about this group on the basis of these documents. Finally, the students were presented with the two conflicting accounts that had been used in the 2008 academy and asked to answer the same questions that had been used in 2008. Students were provided with academic and moderator feedback on their answers to the questions that they were asked to discuss at a number of stages during the academy. Students were also asked to comment on each other's work. The students were organised into two discussion groups. The three institutions taking part in the academy were allocated ten log-ons each and five log-ons from each institution were allocated to each of the two discussion groups. The 2009 academy ran for around five weeks in February and March 2009. The 2009 structure is outlined in Tables 3.

Table 3

The History Virtual Academy (HVA) Structure 2008-9

HVA Stage	Explanation
1. Historiography task (1) (One week)	Students were asked to answer two general questions about variation in historical interpretation.
2. Academic feedback	Group feedback from participating academic historians on both questions was posted to the two groups.
3. Document task (Two weeks)	A collection of documents was posted to the VLE and students were asked to answer one question about the documents and to feedback on other students' posts.
4. Moderator feedback (midway through stage 3)	Generic moderator feedback was posted to both groups on both questions.
5. Historiography Task (1) (Two weeks)	As in 2008, students were asked to read two contrasting historical accounts and to answer two questions by making one post in answer to each question. The 2008 accounts and questions were used.
6. Moderator feedback (midway through stage 5)	Generic moderator feedback was posted to both groups on both questions.
7. Academic feedback	Final group feedback on both questions and adjudication.

Note. From Chapman (2009(a), p.19).

The two discussion designs are different in important respects, as Tables 2 and 3 show, however, it is possible to compare how student thinking developed within each discussion structure because, in both cases, similar questions were addressed at the beginning and the end of the discussion exercises. It is also possible to compare how student thinking developed in one discussion exercise with how it developed in the other because very similar, and in some cases identical, questions were used in both 2008 and 2009. The analysis that follows below compares student answers to the explanatory questions that they were asked and explores the extent to which students' ideas changed during the course of the academies and similarities and differences in student thinking in the 2008 and 2009 academies.

5. The HVA as an intervention: challenging students to interact and think in new ways?

The HVA was conceived, at least in part, as an exercise in cognitive challenge – its purposes included introducing students to the demands of studying history at university – and the interventions that took place within the project and, indeed, the project itself, sought to challenge students to develop new thinking in a number of ways:

- by asking students to interact with students they did not know in other colleges;
- by asking students to make their thoughts 'public' (albeit on a restricted access site); and
- by asking students to interact with university academics.

The project challenged students in a number of specifically historical ways also. The project challenged students through the questions that it asked them to consider: although all 'Advanced Level' history students are required to engage with historical interpretations as part of their courses they are not often asked to think explicitly about *why* it is that differing interpretations of the past arise (Chapman, 2010(b), pp. 54-55).⁹ The HVA presented students with a metacognitive challenge (Bransford, et al., 1999) therefore, by requiring them to develop their thinking about the discipline of history and about why historical disagreements arise.¹⁰ In both phases of the 2008 HVA and in the final phase of the 2009 HVA students were also

⁹ In England the National Curriculum for History asks students in both primary and secondary schools to engage with different interpretations of the past, to explore why different interpretations arise and also to evaluate different interpretations of the past. These issues are also addressed in examination courses followed by 14-16 year old students (GCSE courses) and by 16-19 year old students (Advanced Level courses). Whilst most public examination courses ask students to debate interpretations of the past (often expressed as judgements to be assessed) students are not often asked to explain why different interpretations arise at this level of education (see Chapman, 2010(b)).

¹⁰ My thinking about metacognition has been informed by extremely valuable conversations with Ros Ashby about metacognitive challenge and assessment for learning in history.

presented with a particularly challenging form of historical disagreement – as has been noted, the texts that they were asked to read disagreed fundamentally about a particular group in the past: whilst one text described and discussed this group the other text argued that the group did not exist.

Challenge was embedded in the project also through the academic feedback that the students received which is exemplified below.

[M]uch of what you say is persuasive but do be careful always to use labels carefully. It doesn't tell us all that much to know that [an author] was a Marxist. Marxists come in very different stripes and they frequently squabbled like ferrets in a sack - not least over how to react to the USSR invasion (sorry invitation to restore order!) of Hungary in 1956. It's seductive, but not usually historically warranted, to argue 'He is a Marxist, therefore...'. I'd be inclined to concentrate more on the evidence of the texts themselves which you do extremely well.

**Historian 1, extract from feedback on student discussion board posts
2008 HVA**

I think this response takes us a bit further than the first suggestion, that historians with preconceived ideas 'manipulate' information. If so, how and why would they get such ideas in the first place?

The suggestion that different people fit the same material into different contexts is more promising. In fact the first historian is an historian of popular movements, with longstanding radical sympathies, while the second is an historian of religion and ideas - I don't know of what sympathies. Does that context explain anything more?

**Historian 2, extract from feedback on student discussion board posts
2008 HVA**

As these examples from the 2008 HVA show, the academic feedback to the students included praise but also, and more importantly, challenging and probing questioning that asked students to develop or revise ideas that they had expressed in their posts or to elaborate on claims and develop explanations that they had made.

Similar feedback was provided by historians in the 2009 HVA although feedback was provided to whole discussion groups rather than to individuals. The following extracts exemplify this feedback.

I wondered whether the authors of the Group 2's post were being a little unkind to the 'subjectivity' of historians. You almost give the impression that historians 'choose' their sources on purely prejudicial considerations. Take also your German example. Isn't it likely that some German historians will go

against the grain of national sympathy, particularly when that ‘sympathy’ was refracted through a national socialist lens? Group 5’s response to the original statement was interesting.....

The authors of the Group 4 post wonder whether historians who have lived through a particular period may have ‘better insight’. This is possible, of course, but circumstances can alter perceptions. Some historians might have been too close to events to be objective as historians when they were strongly influenced (for example in response to a humanitarian crisis) as observers. It’s worth noting that there is a long tradition of history being written by key participants in events. Winston Churchill is one obvious example.

Historian 1 extract from feedback on student discussion board posts 2009 HVA

Again, this feedback challenges students by pointing to ways in which the factors that they have invoked as explanations need to be considered and, indeed, explained, further before they can actually do explanatory work. A further example is given below.

We’re generally agreed that historians’ political views influence what they write, but how does this work? Is it like cheering for Arsenal or creationism, where supporters defend a fixed conclusion against every challenge? Or is it more about viewpoint, where (for example) being black or female or royalist makes one aware of issues that have been overlooked without necessarily leading one to fixed conclusions?

If bias is about clinging to pre-conceived positions in the face of evidence, what is the difference between bias and prejudice? Why should previous opinions be so firm as to over-ride later influences? How are they formed in the first place?

Does seeing things from a different viewpoint make one a better or a worse judge, or just a different one? If a football referee asks the linesman who has seen something different, does this introduce bias (after all, the linesman has only seen one side of what happened), or does it help the decision to have a different view point available? Would it matter if the linesman wrote the match report instead of the referee?

Historian 2 extract from feedback on student discussion board posts 2009 HVA

Again, students are asked challenging and probing questions to encourage them to develop their ideas in greater depth. Analogies with every day examples are also used to encourage students to think through the implications of what they are saying in the context of familiar practices and contexts.

Moderator feedback, from the participating history education academic also aimed to challenge students to develop their thinking further. Moderator feedback in both HVAs was provided to the discussion forum as a whole rather than to the authors of individual posts and was presented, in the 2008 HVA, in the form of an embedded word document of 'Feedback Ideas for Question 1' that students might draw upon when commenting on each other's work.

- Are the historians asking the same questions or are they in fact answering different questions about the past? (It is possible to set out with different aims - to set out to describe something in the past, to explain it, to evaluate it and so on.)
- Do the historians examine the same source materials as they pursue their questions about the past?
- Do the historians ask the same questions of their source materials?
- Where different conclusions are drawn from similar facts or sources it may be because the historians disagree about what these things *mean*. There are many reasons why they might. Consider these possibilities (and others that you can think of!) –
 - Do they have differing understandings of the *context* (the period, the background situation and so on)?
 - Are they defining *concepts* in different ways (if we disagree about whether a 'revolution' has occurred, for example, it may be because we are using different criteria to define the concept 'revolution')?

Moderator feedback extract 2008 HVA

Again, this feedback takes the form of questions: dichotomous questions that ask students to explore possibilities that they may not have considered and also questions that are vehicles for introducing or highlighting issues to consider (such as meaning, context and concepts). The 2009 moderator feedback aimed to do the same things that the 2008 feedback set out to do, however, it was introduced dialogically, in the form of a post to the forum that replied to and acknowledged good ideas in student posts, rather than in the form of an embedded sheet of ideas to use.

Many interesting ideas are emerging to explain the differences in the two historians' views and almost all the points that people have made focus on differences in 'interpretation'. It is clear that the two texts *make sense* of the documents in very different ways and *draw different conclusions* as a result!

Some posts explain the differing conclusions that the authors draw in terms of their approach to the source materials. Do the historians use their sources in the same ways? Do they ask the same questions of the source materials?

Some posts suggest that the difference relates to the conclusions that the historians draw. This is a point about logic and argument, I think. Do the authors draw the same conclusions from the information that the sources can provide? Perhaps this dispute is about what *it is* and what *it is not* reasonable to conclude from the evidence, therefore?

Drawing conclusions, as a number of posts note, involves making assumptions. Perhaps this disagreement can be explained through the different beliefs that the historians hold – the different ideas that they bring to the evidence. Do they have different beliefs about the context, for example? One post makes an intriguing suggestion: it may be that the historians simply understand concepts differently – if one historian treats the Ranters as a movement and the other does not, perhaps it is because they have different conceptions of what a movement is?

Moderator feedback extract 2009 HVA

6. Data Analysis methodology

The data set analysed in this paper consists of student posts made in the first and in the final stages of both the 2008 and 2009 HVAs.¹¹ Only posts made by those students and student groups who made posts in both stages of the two iterations of the project are analysed in what follows. Twelve of the fifteen individual participants in the 2008 HVA completed both the first and the final stages of the exercise and sixteen of the thirty groups of students who took part in the 2009 HVA made posts at both the beginning and at the end of their participation.¹² The purpose of comparing posts at the beginning and at the end of the exercise is to track change in student thinking across the exercise as a whole.

Data sets consisting of the posts identified above were analysed using an inductive coding strategy associated with grounded theoretic approaches to data analysis (Blaikie, 1993; Gibbs, 2002; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The data sets were analysed and coded in iterative cycles until a system of codes had been developed that could code the entire data set for both the first and final stages of both HVAs.

¹¹ In the 2009 HVA a number of students posted initial posts and posts revising their initial posts as replies to other students rather than as the ‘final’ stage of the HVA. The designation ‘final’ is used loosely therefore below in respect of the 2009 HVA.

¹² The 73 students who took part in the 2009 HVA were organised into student groups, in order to make the discussions manageable for the participant academics. There were 30 log ons in total and 10 were allocated to each of the participant institutions. Teachers then allocated logs ons to groups of students or to individual students.

Twenty five descriptive codes were developed. These descriptive codes were then grouped into 8 broader code categories on the basis of perceived similarities of content and used to make comparisons between student posts made at the beginning and at the end of the HVA data sets. The code categories are summarized and explained in Table 4. There is no space here to illustrate the codes systematically, however, the discussion of student posts below will explore the analysis of the student posts in some depth.

Table 4

Code Categories developed to interpret the data sets

Code Category	Explanation
Sources of evidence	The quantity or quality of the source materials available to the historians.
Subjectivity	Aspects of historians' subjectivities – such as their backgrounds, their ideologies or values.
Present context	Aspects of historians' present context – such as the climate of opinion and the consensus prevalent at the time of writing and their nearness / distance from the past in question.
Innovation	Historians' desire to innovate and be distinctive in their accounts of the past.
Genre	The style of writing used or the type of history being written.
Analysis	Historians' techniques or the depth of their analysis.
Mode of Enquiry	Historians' purposes or aims and the questions historians asked.
Meaning construction	Historians' evaluation or interpretation of source materials and / or their conceptualization, classification and contextualization of these materials.

Note. Student posts were coded under one or more of the following categories if they explained variation in the accounts in terms of the considerations explained in the table.

7. Data Analysis: comparisons within and across the 2008 and 2009 data sets

7. (a) General patterns across the data sets

The tables that follow record patterns in the distribution of explanations for variation across the 2008 and 2009 data sets and allow differences in the type of explanation prevalent within and across the two data sets to be identified.

Tables 5(a) and 6(a) summarise the coding distribution by respondent and HVA phase in the 2008 and 2009 data sets respectively and Tables 5(b) and 6(b) summarise the distribution of instances of codes by HVA phase in the 2008 and 2009 data sets respectively. There are two tables for each data set because respondents often made reference to more than one idea coded under each category.

In all four tables, the incidence of explanations coded under each category is presented for the first and final stages of each HVA and, in the final column of each table, the code totals for the first stage of the HVA is subtracted from the code totals for the last stage of the HVA to highlight differences in the incidence of explanatory moves between the two phases.

Table 5(a)

A comparison of the numbers of respondents whose posts were coded under the code categories in the first and last stages of the 2008 HVA, (n = 12)

	2008 Stage 1 Respondent count	2008 Stage 2 Respondent count	Stage 2 minus Stage 1
Sources of evidence	8	7	-1
Subjectivity	3	4	1
Present context	4	1	-3
Innovation	0	1	1
Genre	0	2	2
Analysis	0	0	0
Mode of Enquiry	1	4	3
Meaning construction	10	12	2

Table 5(b)

A comparison of the incidence of explanatory moves coded under the code categories in all respondents' posts in the first and last stages of the 2008 HVA, (n = 43 (Stage 1) and 49 (Stage 2))

	2008 Stage 1 Explanatory move count	2008 Stage 1 Explanatory move count	Stage 2 minus Stage 1
Sources of evidence	14	8	-6
Subjectivity	3	5	2
Present context	5	2	-3
Innovation	0	1	1
Genre	0	2	2
Analysis	0	0	0
Mode of Enquiry	1	4	3
Meaning construction	20	27	7

Table 6(a)

A comparison of the numbers of respondents whose posts were coded under the code categories in the first and last stages of the 2009 HVA, (n = 16)

	2009 Stage 1 Respondent count	2009 Stage 2 Respondent count	Stage 2 minus Stage 1
Sources of evidence	11	4	-7
Subjectivity	14	6	-8
Present context	9	0	-9
Innovation	5	2	-3
Genre	1	1	0
Analysis	3	0	-3
Mode of Enquiry	3	0	-3
Meaning construction	4	15	11

Table 6(b)

A comparison of the incidence of explanatory moves coded under the code categories in all respondents' posts in the first and last stages of the 2009 HVA, (n = 71 (Stage 1) and 40 (Stage 2))

	2009 Stage 1 Explanatory move count	2009 Stage 1 Explanatory move count	Stage 2 minus Stage 1
Sources of evidence	11	4	-7
Subjectivity	30	6	-24
Present context	13	0	-13
Innovation	6	2	-4
Genre	1	1	0
Analysis	3	0	-3
Mode of Enquiry	3	0	-3
Meaning construction	4	27	23

These tables must be interpreted with caution, since the data samples are small and patterns in the data are easily distorted by individual answers.¹³ Nevertheless, it is apparent, from the tables, that the overall form of the student responses changed across both data sets, or, to say the same thing in a different way, it is apparent that the HVA process made a difference to the kinds of explanation that many of the students offered for variation in accounts.

The tables reveal the following broad patterns of change in the data sets for the 2008 HVA:¹⁴

- explanations for variation in terms of Sources of Evidence and the historians' Present Context decline between the first and the last stages of the exercise;
- explanations for variation in terms of Mode of Enquiry and Meaning Construction increase between the first and the last stages of the exercise.

¹³ Thus, for example, the increase in explanation in terms of Subjectivity between the first and last stages of the 2008 HVA is explained by changes in the response of one individual.

¹⁴ Categories coding to three or fewer respondents are excluded from the analysis below.

Some of these patterns, notably the decline in explanation for variation in terms of Sources of Evidence, are more clearly apparent in the second table, that counts the instances of explanations rather than the numbers of students who made reference to particular types of explanation.

The tables reveal the following broad pattern of change in the data sets for the 2009 HVA:

- explanations for variation in terms of Sources of Evidence, the historians' Present Context and the historians' Subjectivity decline between the first and the last stages of the exercise;
- explanations for variation in terms of Meaning Construction increase between the first and the last stages of the exercise.

It is apparent that the changes in the types of explanation offered by the students for variations in historical interpretation are much more marked in the 2009 HVA than in the 2008 HVA. This finding is unsurprising, however, given the structural differences between the two tasks: whereas in 2008 the students answered the same question twice in relation to the same specific texts, in 2009 the students answered a general question and then a specific question. It is also apparent, however, that the general pattern of change is similar in the two data sets: in both cases there is a decrease in the number of students, and in the incidence of explanations, that account for variation in interpretation in terms of Sources of Evidence and Present Context and an increase in the number of students, and in the incidence of explanations, that account for variation in interpretation in terms of Meaning Construction. In other words, there is a decline in explanation in terms of the materials available to the historians and who the historians are and an increase in explanation in terms of what the historians *do*. Clear differences between the two data sets are apparent also: whereas, in 2009, there is a dramatic decline in explanation in terms of Subjectivity over the course of the discussions, there is a slight increase in explanation in terms of this factor in the 2008 data set; whereas, in 2009 there was an increase in the incidence of explanation in terms of Mode of Enquiry, in 2008 the incidence of this form of explanation for account variation declines.

What do these patterns mean at the level of individual responses and what changes do the patterns reveal in the students' approaches to explaining variation in historical interpretation? The comments that follow explore individual posts and attempt to make sense of some of these patterns.

7. (b) Qualitative differences in student explanations across the data sets

Whereas five of the twelve respondents in stage 1 of the 2008 HVA explained variation in the two accounts by suggesting that the historians had different source materials available to them because they were writing at different times, none of these

students explained variation in these ways in their final posts. I will discuss two examples of student posts below to explore what this shift in explanation type means in terms of the model of historical practice the students appear to be articulating.

The two historians have differing arguments on the actions and existence of the Ranters for a number of potential reasons. Firstly, the historical argument of Text 1 was composed in the “mid-1970’s” whereas the argument of Text 2 was composed in the “late-1980’s”; this ten year differentiation may have resulted in new evidence coming to light that could hinder the argument of Text 1 and enforce that of Text 2...

Initial post extract 2008 Student 1

We have both assumed that this ten year gap has provided historian 2 with new evidence... that has transformed... understanding... It is more likely... that they have come to differing opinions because of their differing interpretations of the same sources; be it for personal religious reasons or other.

Final post extract 2008 Student 1

As the extracts show, this student moves from an explanation in terms of available source materials and towards an explanation in terms of the historians’ *activity*. In their first post, things just happen and what the historian does is shaped by things happening: the ‘new evidence.... coming to light’ *acts upon* the historian in the first post, whereas, in the student’s second post, it is the historians who are the *agents* and who ‘come to... opinions... because of their interpretations’, or, in other words, because of things that they *do*.

A very similar pattern is apparent in the following example.

[T]he historian of text 2 was writing the source in the late 1980s as compared to Historian 1 who wrote his extract in the mid 1970s. In this decade there may have been new evidence come to light regarding 'The Ranters' resulting in a shift in opinion between the two historians.

Initial post extract 2008 Student 2

Okay, you have gone straight in with the same point I have, looking at the provenance of the sources (about which we don't really know anything about!) instead of reflecting upon the evidence and the argument for each of the interpretations..... we haven't looked at whether the historians are actually answering the same questions. upon reflection, I think the first text is more about who they were and what they believed in whereas the second text focuses more on the question 'were they?' instead of 'who they were'.....You have said the same as me, that the historian have their own opinions but you haven't said WHY... looking back at the sources, I can see that they disagree as they have each interpreted the sources they have differently, leading them to two completely contrasting opinions. Again, I think this difference also depends on the hypothesis each of the historians is working on - if they are answering two different questions then yes, obviously the content is going to have a different focus resulting in two contrasting opinions.

Final post extract 2008 Student 2

Again, we can see a shift in these posts from a *passive* representation of historians, who are represented as *acted upon* by the sources in the first post, to a view in which the historians are *actively responsible* for the claims that they advance which they create by acting and *making decisions*, in the final post: in this post historians do things – they argue, ask and answer different questions and ‘work on... hypotheses’. The differences in the accounts are presented, therefore, not as the result of contingent factors about the record (historians happening to have different sources) but in terms of factors *intrinsic to the process of historical interpretation* itself.

Striking and cognate changes in the conceptualization of what historians do were apparent in a number of other posts that did not shift away from the ‘different sources’ explanation. In the example below, the student shifted from an initial post that did not provide any explanation for variation but that simply summarized what the historians had said to a post that did model historians as agents but as biased and subjective agents and then, finally, to a post that modeled historians’ activity as legitimate and as having a logic. The following extracts illustrate these shifts in thinking.

The main reason that historians hold different opinions is that whereas the author of text 1 suggests that the Ranters posed a challenge to society, the author of text 2 denies their very existence.

Initial post extract 2008 Student 3

This difference is primarily based on a disparity in interpretation, not due to a difference in evidence. Indeed, both use the same evidence, such as the Blasphemy Act of 1650, but twist this evidence to suit their argument.

Subsequent post extract 2008 Student 3

Historian one is willing to believe that references to Ranters from contemporary sources constitute evidence which substantiates their existence. He takes fragmentations of evidence, such as reference to them in a contemporary play, as proof they existed.

Final post extract 2008 Student 3

These examples suggest that consequential changes occurred between the first and the final stages of the 2008 HVA in the ways in which many of the students modeled historians' activity: a shift away from a *passive* representation of historians and towards *active* explanations for variations in accounts in terms of *interpretive decisions* made by historians appears to have taken place.

It will be recalled that Tables 6(a) and (b) revealed a very clear overall pattern of change in student responses. The shift in responses is dramatic: on the one hand, a decline of 7 (44%) in the number of respondents explaining variation in terms of Sources of Evidence, of 8 (50%) in the number explaining variation in terms of historians' Subjectivity and of 9 (56%) in the number explaining variation in terms of Present Context; and, on the other hand, an increase of 11 (67%) in the number of respondents explaining variation in terms of active Meaning Construction by historians.

The following example illustrates the nature of this shift in the data set.

Historians could come to different conclusions regarding historical events because of the sources that the historian had used. Different sources have interpretations of events and this can affect what the historian using them concludes. Also the historian may have a better insight into an event if they were there or have access to first hand account rather than using other historians' conclusions. Another factor in drawing different conclusions is the personal bias of the historians. This can include the social background, which can affect interpretations of movements such as chartism, where a historian with a working class background would be more inclined to favour the chartists. The political background of the historian can affect their conclusion.

A communist historian would have a very different conclusion of the Russian Revolution to a socialist.

Initial post extract 2009 Student 4

Some historians choose to interpret sources in a more subjective light, being more critical of any inferences that can be drawn. Historian A suggests that the four sources about the Ranters suggest that they did exist, whereas historian B claims that four sources is not a satisfactory amount to draw a feasible conclusion from. Some historians may choose to accept the attributes of the sources, for example historian A uses pamphlets written by Ranters to argue that they did exist, whereas historian B does not seem to think this is relevant. Furthermore, it is the interpretation of the sources that determines the conclusions which are to be drawn.

Final post extract 2009 Student 4

Like many of the initial posts in the 2008 HVA, the first post above models historians as *acted upon* more than as *acting*. The student does talk about historians using different sources, however, it is the content of the sources that 'affect' the historian's claims and, when bias is discussed, the historian is again 'affected' by their social or political backgrounds. There is little sense, here, of the historian as agent and there is also – in the comment about primary evidence – little indication of awareness that the meaning of source materials is shaped by historians who actively interrogate them. In marked contrast, historians are very clearly agents in the second post: 'it is the interpretation of the sources that determines the conclusions which are to be drawn'. Historians draw conclusions, make interpretations, and are, as it were, self-determining, or autonomous, in these activities.

Tables 6(a) and (b) indicate that there were a number of students whose posts went against the general trend identified in the 2009 HVA data set. The following student, for example, was coded as moving from a stance that explained difference in terms of historians' Meaning Construction and towards explanation in terms of Subjectivity.

As mentioned by most of the individuals on this discussion board, personal opinion of individual historians do indeed affect judgement and as such conclusions drawn about the past. However the underlying reason is far simpler than that. Anyone who has researched, or tried to research a particular topic have been overwhelmed by the amount of material upon said subject... even in areas where it may appear that material is reduced, debate to whether the material is reliable, or even usable, may lead to differing opinion.

Therefore the underlying reason to why historians come to differing conclusions about the past is because to select a manageable and readable (or even to create a conclusion) they must be selective about the material and the opinions they include. This selection of material differs for each historian (and is often directed or influenced by either the point they are trying to make or personal opinions) and this difference is what creates different conclusions.

Initial post extract 2009 Student 6

It may seem obvious to suggest that the selection of primary sources is the only reason that the Historians differ so widely in their opinion upon the Ranters. Indeed this makes some sense... Yet “Historian B” suggests that there are only ‘four direct Ranter sources from which to construct their arguments’... This, therefore, cannot explain why such radically different opinions.... [are] formed.

Thus one must consider the socioeconomic or political views each historian may have, and indeed any “point to prove” they may have. To do with the Ranters one must consider the historians views... on the social climate of the period they are studying... As such it may be suggested that these, often subconscious, influences are what affect the historians viewpoints and as such cause the different viewpoints offered by the different historians.

Final post extract 2009 Student 6

In this students’ first post it is very clear that historians have to make decisions in order to construct meanings about the past: historians have to make decisions about the selection of evidence and historians engage in debates about the principles on which to select evidence and, strikingly, subjective opinions, which are dismissed as a sufficient explanation for variation in the opening lines of the response, are described as *emerging* from debates of this kind rather than as determining their outcomes. The student’s final post argues very much the opposite case, however: in the second post historians are acted upon by factors beyond their control – their prejudices and subconscious thinking ‘cause’ historians to articulate different ‘viewpoints’. It is tempting to suggest that this outcome is a function of a restricted understanding of the kinds of interpretive decisions that historians have to make. In the first post, the student shows that historians have to make decisions about the selection of sources and, therefore, that subjectivity is not a sufficient explanation for historical disagreement. In the second post, where the texts in question suggest that selection is not an issue, the student argues that subjectivity is the explanation for variation: there only seem to be two options – subjectivity or selection – and where one is ruled out then the other is the only alternative.

The following example illustrates another exception to the general trend in the 2009 data set. It is only a partial exception, however. On the one hand, the general pattern noted in the first 2009 example considered above and also in the 2008 data set, is apparent here: whereas the first post models historians as *passive* and *acted upon* in the second post they are *active* and *make decisions*. It seems probable that the student invokes subjectivity – in the form of ideological bias – in the second post because they have no alternative explanation to hand that might account for historians defining concepts in variable ways.

It is obvious that personal opinions will play a vital role in any historian's final conclusion... Also, if the historian is researching something that they have heard about briefly, their final judgment may be affected... Furthermore, the socio-political and socio-economic background of the historian will undoubtedly influence the conclusion of their study. A Russian historian living during Stalin's lifetime would have been inclined to write positively about his predecessor, Lenin. Similarly, the intended audience will also weigh heavily in the historian's mind while he/she is writing. The time of writing will also have a profound effect on the historian's judgment...

Initial post extract 2009 Student 7

The two historians have come to different conclusions for a variety of reasons. Historian A makes many face value assumptions about the sources, such as Coppe's pamphlet which was described as 'evidence' of the Ranter challenge against middle class society....

Historian B picks up on this lack of solid evidence making no assumptions, but at the same time only offering a limited conclusion in that the Ranters did not exist...

These striking differences are due to the way they have interpreted the sources and that they are simply two different historians that understand the concept of Ranterism differently.

The historians have different ideology and political predispositions, with Historian A being more 'left wing' and open minded hence leading to the assumptions made; and Historian B more 'right wing' making cautious estimates rather than wild assumptions

Final post extract 2009 Student 7

8. Conclusions

The participants in the 2008 and 2009 HVAs are not a representative sample of 16-19 year old history students and their postings to the discussion boards reflect the questions to which they were responding and the influence of the feedback and input that they received: the data discussed above is clearly subject to both sample bias and task effects, therefore, and it would be unwise to ground general conclusions on the analysis of this data.

Furthermore, it would be naive, in a paper that has argued that knowledge construction is relative to the questions and hermeneutic purposes of the enquiry through which knowledge claims are produced, to claim any definitive status for the interpretations of data advanced here: there are other questions that could be asked of these data sets and different answers would result were alternative interpretive assumptions to be made.

Nevertheless, the data and discussion above provide strong support for at least two claims and more tentative support for a third claim.

Firstly, further support is provided here for the findings of existing work on student preconceptions about interpretation in the prevalence of explanations for account variation in terms of author distortion, on the one hand, and in the otherwise passive representations of historians contained in the initial post data (Lee 1997, 1998, 2001).

Secondly the data and discussion suggests that the virtual academies appear to have enabled students to advance and develop their thinking beyond the initial stances that they articulated: there are, perhaps, grounds for concluding that many of the students' developed a fuller understanding of the ways in which historians are active in their construction of the past through historical interpretation. This conclusion needs to be treated with great caution, of course: short term change in what students say in an online discussion environment is not evidence of durable change in how students think. Nevertheless, there are grounds to support the tentative conclusion that presenting students with conflicts of interpretation and challenging students to think metacognitively about them through engagement with expert historical thinkers can have positive effects on students' understanding of historical knowledge construction.

Thirdly, and finally, there is the suggestion, raised in the discussion of the exceptional 2009 posts above, that it is not enough to model active interpretation if we want to move students on; we also need to help students develop rational rather than subjective or contingent explanations for key aspects of historical interpretation such as conceptualisation and source selection.

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