

Historical Non-Fiction as Pedagogy: Engaging Learners in Source Analysis

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History as a discipline often fails to arouse interest among young learners because of the general perception that History is a subject that requires only memorisation skills, compounded by the notion that it demands no critical thinking ability or creativity. Therefore, it is believed by many that it is a dry, tedious subject, particularly in modern school education, which focuses on exam-oriented learning (Eisenhauer, 2001). In such an environment, learners often fail to understand the purpose and relevance of studying History, which leads to disengagement and lack of interest.

The study was prompted by a classroom challenge involving a grade nine learner who perceived History as a discipline limited to rote memorisation. Previous attempts to engage this student through creative exercise have resulted in partial success, underscoring the need for a more transformative pedagogical intervention. This experience with the learner prompted me to search for a new pedagogical tool to open a new teaching-learning approach. Such an innovative pedagogical tool would be designed with disengaged learners like him in mind, which would arouse their interest and develop 'historical literacy.' Understanding historical sources is essential for growing interest in the subject itself because it aids any learner to grasp the idea of how historians reconstruct the past before us (Wineburg, 2001). So, when I planned to introduce the concept of sources and how historians use the plethora of sources, I taught him a chapter on the Second World War. Keeping in mind his intellectual maturity, the non-fiction *work - The Diary of Anne Frank* was chosen to show him how we can rewrite the History of Germany during the Nazi era from this literary work. Therefore, non-fiction works have been used as a pedagogical tool to help my learner understand the sources used by historians to reconstruct the past and teach him the art of writing History using various primary sources. With this research, attempt has been made to address teachers' challenges while teaching History. I, therefore, searched for a new and innovative pedagogical tool that would make the learners more interested in the subject by making them understand how History is written. By analysing the texts like this, learners would learn not only about particular historical events but the broad methodologies and sources applied by historians while reconstructing the past (Hicks, 2016; Rodwell, 2020). This classroom research paved the way for new ways of teaching, keeping aside the traditional technique where there is heavy reliance on textbooks, lectures, and rote learning. As an educator, it was my ethical responsibility to change his mindset because it was not only creating an impediment in conducting a lesson but also a sign of detachment between the learner and the subject. So, I delved into the research related to the pedagogical tool and took recourse to grounded theory because it allows researchers to formulate their concepts after analysing the data.

A vigorous study of the works by eminent scholars in this field have been consulted before conducting this classroom research and it helped to point out the areas which are still untraversed so far as the pedagogy related to History is concerned. For instance, *History Teaching and Historical Understanding* by Husbands (1996) examines how history educators can bridge the gap between academic history and classroom learning, reinforcing the need to balance factual retention and analytical engagement. These works collectively contribute to a broader understanding of historical sources and the methodologies required to engage young learners in meaningful historical inquiry. As Sexias (2000) discussed, historical non-fiction encourages learners to recognise that History is not simply a collection of facts but a dynamic field involving interpretation and debates. Grant Rodwell's works, such as *Whose History? Engaging History Students through Historical Fiction* (2013) provides critical insights into history education, particularly in challenging traditional pedagogies that focus on rote learning. When effectively structured, Rodwell argues that historical narratives can facilitate deeper engagement by immersing students in the complexities of historiography and the construction of historical knowledge. His research advocates incorporating historical non-fiction and fiction to encourage learners to analyse sources and the biases that shape historical interpretation critically. O'Connor (2011) highlights the importance of engaging students with primary and secondary historical sources. Using non-fiction texts like diaries, letters, official records, and newspaper articles encourages students to analyse and interpret historical events from different perspectives. This process helps to build critical thinking skills and challenges the often-passive way history is taught through textbooks alone. Another very relevant piece of literature for this research was conducted by Rosenblat (2012), where he discusses the book 'The Thief' and how it can be used in the classrooms to teach students about the holocaust and the Nazi Germany era. A study by VanSledright (2014) discusses how non-fiction texts in the classroom can prompt students to engage critically with primary sources. He further argues that when students analyse these non-fiction works, they notice how authors quote from primary sources, juxtapose them with secondary sources, and frame historical arguments. Crawford and Zygouris-Coe (2008) argue that using historical fiction and non-fiction helps the learners to walk into the shoes of the character or personality, making History more relatable. Along similar lines, Rycik and Roster (2009) viewed that the use of historical fiction and non-fiction often helps the learners to undergo vicarious experiences of places and people they otherwise were unaware of. They cited the example of the work 'Leah's Pony,' which was taught to Australian students, and the teachers observed that many students were emotionally surcharged reading the pain of Leah's sufferings during the Great Depression. Therefore, this important historical event became relatable, and through this description, they learnt how it affected the general masses. Similarly, Tosh's *The Pursuit of History* (2015) discusses historiography and historical methods, offering frameworks educators can use to teach students how to evaluate sources effectively.

In History education, helping students differentiate between primary and secondary sources is critical for fostering historical literacy. Classroom researchers have long explored the use of various pedagogical tools to teach these distinctions. One such tool, historical non-fiction, offers a rich opportunity for educators to illustrate how primary and secondary sources contribute to historical writing. This review examines how historical non-fiction can effectively teach learners the difference between primary and secondary sources while fostering deeper historical inquiry.

Primary sources are firsthand accounts from the studied period, such as diaries, official records, photographs, and artifacts. These sources provide direct insight into past events. Secondary sources, conversely, are works that analyze, interpret, or summarize primary materials. They include history books, academic articles, and documentaries. The distinction between these types of sources is fundamental to the study of History, as it enables students to understand how historians construct their narratives (VanSledright, 2008). Despite this importance, learners often struggle to distinguish between primary and secondary sources, confusing the two. To address this challenge, educators need to employ strategies that clarify the roles of each and provide students with opportunities to analyze both types of sources.

Historical non-fiction, a genre dedicated to recounting past events through factual narrative, is a powerful pedagogical tool for teaching about primary and secondary sources. Historical non-fiction can be categorized into works that use primary sources, such as autobiographies or collections of letters, and secondary interpretations, such as biographies or historical analyses (Wineburg, 1991). Educators can provide concrete examples of how primary and secondary sources are used to create historical narratives by introducing students to these non-fiction texts.

Historical non-fiction can help students understand the process of historical interpretation. For instance, works that use primary sources, such as memoirs or eyewitness accounts, allow students to examine how firsthand experiences are framed and contextualized. On the other hand, secondary non-fiction texts, such as scholarly articles or historical analyses, enable students to explore how historians synthesize primary evidence to present broader narratives (Tosh, 2008). Through this comparative approach, students gain insight into the process of historical writing, learning how primary materials are selected, interpreted, and woven into coherent accounts of the past.

Classroom researchers have suggested various ways to integrate historical non-fiction into history education. For example, one approach involves pairing primary sources, such as personal letters or diaries, with secondary sources that interpret those materials (Barton and Levstik, 2004). This strategy encourages students to compare how different types of sources contribute to understanding a historical event. Additionally, educators can encourage students to analyze historical non-fiction through source criticism, guiding them to assess both primary and secondary sources' credibility, perspective, and biases (Levesque, 2008). Furthermore, historical non-fiction can introduce students to the concept of historiography—the study of how History is written and interpreted over time. By reading non-fiction works that reflect different historical perspectives, students can better understand how historical narratives evolve based on new evidence or changing societal contexts (Clark, 2012). This process teaches learners the importance of primary and secondary sources and fosters critical thinking by encouraging students to question the nature of historical knowledge. All the works by eminent scholars suggest that non-fiction historical novels are effective pedagogical tools that can be used for teaching History in a classroom setting.

To conduct this classroom research, firstly, a research question was formulated following the grounded theory guidelines. The question that was formulated after classroom experience was mainly guided by the challenges that was faced as an educator teaching humanities subject. The question was: What pedagogical theories and classroom practices emerge from the lived experiences of using historical non-fiction to teach source interpretation in history education? One of the core principles of this theory is rooted in the strategies related to qualitative inquiry with multiple stages of data collection and processing (Cresswell, 2009). According to the proponents of this theory, the research question lies at the heart of any research, and it is essential to remember that the ontological and epistemological orientations of the researcher play a pivotal role in shaping the research question (Charmaz, 2014). So, my ontological position is guided by the reality I face while teaching my learner. In contrast, epistemological orientation is based on the relationship I, as an inquirer, share with the known elements of research. The reasoning behind choosing the Grounded theory to substantiate my data is that it provided ample scope for rigorous data analysis without any preset notion and fostered creativity among the researcher by allowing him to contrive new concepts and theories that would enrich the discipline to which he belongs (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Following the constructivist paradigm, where scholars have claimed that the reality cannot be known but needs to be interpreted, I followed a similar pathway while formulating my research question, keeping in mind the reality in the field of teaching History to young learners who either suffer from tedium or fear while reading History because of the general perception about the discipline that requires no critical thinking skills or creativity except mugging skills. Therefore, the research question I had posed before delving into the fields of investigation was: *How can non-fiction be used as a pedagogical tool to make young learners understand the use of primary and secondary sources for writing History?* However, the main problem with using the Grounded theory lies in the doubt of generalisability. No doubt, the grounded theory rooted in social constructivism and pragmatism gives importance to the researcher and views that the researcher cannot be separated; the perspective of the researcher and the respondent are equally essential, but whether the theory propounded by the researcher at the end of the research can be applied generally is something that has always been an issue of debate in academia (Birks and Mills, 2015). This lacuna of the theory is always kept in mind. At the same time, I concluded the findings of my research mainly based on the responses of my learner from the point of prior knowledge checking exercise to different creative tasks I have assigned to make him aware of the sources, their difference in nature, the distinction between primary and secondary sources, and those tasks that were meant to develop the fervour of a historian by using certain sections of the chosen non-fictional work. The sample is tiny, and the outcome may vary if applied to a quantitatively large and psychologically diverse sample. The observation and theoretical perspective I have developed after rigorous analysis of the collected data is only practical if tested on a large and heterogeneous sample. However, the importance of this kind of classroom-based research cannot be ignored. It challenges the belief that History is an isolated discipline, and using grounded theory as the philosophical underpinning allows researchers to develop new concepts and theories from the data gathered (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). However, the rationale behind using this theoretical framework was that it not only provides a systematic approach to data analysis but frees the researcher from testing any hypothesis beforehand and powers him with a position to formulate theories after a rigorous interplay of data collection and data analysis.

Similar strategies were used for analysing my learner's initial responses during the prior knowledge check, comparing it with the responses he gave during the classroom activities, which helped me to assess how his understanding of historical sources has evolved. As we know, the grounded theory encourages researchers to code data to formulate abstract concepts. However, I have worked on a minimal scale, analysed and coded his responses from the writing assignments I had set, and what I could observe was that the use of this kind of new pedagogical tools (non-fiction historical works) helps to eradicate fixed mindset of this kind of disengaged learners and develop an interest in knowing not only the discipline but its philosophy, methodology, and sources. Constructivist Grounded Theory demands researchers' active roles in constructing meaning (Charmaz, 2014). As a teacher-researcher, I played the role of an active facilitator. My relativist ontological stance was rooted in the lived experience of classroom challenges, and my epistemological orientation acknowledged the interactive nature of knowledge-building exercises with my learner. Therefore, my research question, born out of the challenges I faced while teaching and the rich, reliable data collected through classroom research with my single learner, proposes that innovative pedagogical tools like non-fiction narratives promote understanding of historical sources and ameliorate history writing skills among young learners. However, due to my limited sampling scope, this conceptual understanding will be a springboard for further research in similar educational contexts. As the guidelines of the proponents of the grounded theory, were followed I did not create any exhaustive literature review. According to Charmaz (2014), a literature review should not be conducted before data collection. So, I formulated my research question based on my challenges with the learner and the work 'Whose History? Engaging History Students through Historical Fiction' by Grant Rodwell (2013) was a source of inspiration for using narratives to captivate learners' imaginations, making historical events relatable.

To reflect upon the experiences, Van Manen's model was chosen, as he is a scholar who has advocated for a teaching-learning expertise that goes beyond empirical knowledge and emphasises exploring the lived experiences of teaching and learning (Van Manen, 2016). Grounded theory provided the necessary framework to analyse the data collected through classroom research. It gave the scope to formulate new concepts and theories. In contrast, VanManen's reflective cycle allowed me to interpret the lived classroom experiences, broadening the relevance of this research where emergent theory and deep pedagogical reflection get intertwined. In my case, I would like to point out that the use of this historical non-fiction as a new pedagogical tool aligns with Max Van Manen's model of pedagogy, as he has always supported new methods of teaching adopted in response to specific situations (Van Manen, 2016). My grade 9 learner's disengagement was not merely a behavioural issue. Still, his question regarding the relevance of studying History was a lived reality that demanded a thoughtful, responsive pedagogical intervention.

Therefore, the first change I implemented was the introduction of a new 'learning space' centred on a historical non-fiction text. This was chosen with two crucial aspects in mind: firstly, his emotional maturity, and secondly, that it would not only serve as a pedagogical tool for understanding historical sources but also free him from the burden of facts and offer the experience of a living human story. However, there is no doubt that, in the initial stage, I faced a setback, as he was reluctant to read the entire novel due to time constraints within his scheduled school curriculum. To reduce his workload, I

asked him to read specific pages and provided a book summary to help him understand its context and content.

Van Manen's model of reflection is based on a phenomenological–hermeneutic approach, where he urges teachers to transcend the boundaries of technical reflection and avoid being restricted to specific learning outcomes (Van Manen, 2016). Although the learning objectives of my lesson were clearly outlined, I found that the discussions initiated after reading selected diary entries demonstrated that not only had my learner begun to understand the multitude of sources used by historians to reconstruct the past, but he had also developed a new sense of ownership of learning (Patel, 2017). As Van Manen speaks of the "slowness of reflection", I would say these subtle changes in my learner emerged only by the third day of the lesson, when the diary served as a gateway to understanding History as a meaningful, relatable discipline (Van Manen, 2016).

I also noticed that his skills of critical inquiry had sharpened, as he was able to identify features of the Nazi era from the pages he read. This gave me an opportunity for hermeneutic reflection because he was, in effect, becoming a young historian—learning to handle sources and bring the past to life. I must point out, however, that in the first class, where I used a PowerPoint presentation with images of various historical sources and asked him to identify them, he did not show much interest. The process of checking prior knowledge, which I conducted through an interactive session, also fell short; the conceptual questions I asked failed to initiate deeper discussion.

However, the introduction of the diary brought about a pivotal change. It stimulated interest and, as shown in his assignment, demonstrated that he was not just learning about the era but experiencing it through the lens of daily life as narrated in the diary. Thus, the teaching-learning experience progressed to the levels of understanding and creating. I firmly believe that transformations took place gradually yet steadily in how he viewed History—not as a collection of dry, isolated facts but as a web of interconnected events that continue to shape our world today. This shift in mindset was reflected in the questions he asked and the opinions he formed. When I asked him to write an essay on the causes of the Second World War, he highlighted that the anti-Semitic laws promulgated by the Nazi regime caused a global uproar and considered the war a fight against fascism. This emphasis on the threat to humanity and the rise of fascism clearly showed how deeply the diary had influenced him. Again, this aligns with Van Manen's hermeneutic approach, which emphasises how meaning unfolds gradually over time (Van Manen, 2016).

This slow but observable transformation—where he engaged more deeply with the text and began to form strong opinions based on the diary—reminded me of the opportunity to introduce discussions around bias, source selection, and the importance of corroboration in historical interpretation. Following the essence of the phenomenological–hermeneutic approach, I reframed my understanding of the teaching-learning experience: it is not a linear process but somewhat unpredictable, layered, and deeply personal (Van Manen, 2016). This realisation stems from Van Manen's concepts of temporality and relationality. Although I had designed the lesson with specific learning outcomes in mind, the lived experience with the text and my pedagogical approach provided new insights for both of us. My role shifted from teacher to facilitator to co-inquirer and co-constructor of knowledge, dismantling our

previous hierarchy (Lee, 2021). This transformation is further evident when I pointed out that his essay on the causes of the Second World War reflected deep engagement with the chosen source—*The Diary of Anne Frank*. We also discussed how reliance on a single source might lead to bias and how historians overcome this by corroborating different accounts (Harris, 2020). This dialogue showed how our journey went beyond the initial learning objective (identifying sources used to write History) and opened new avenues of inquiry and understanding. After this engaging dialogue, he was given another assignment to develop his critical thinking and enhance his historical consciousness. He was asked to write an argumentative essay on the topic- How far do you think Hitler was responsible for the outbreak of the Second World War? This particular assignment opened new and deeper discussion as I countered his statement that Hitler was responsible for the Second World War by showing him a new set of evidence that held stringent clauses of the Treaty of Versailles were responsible. This showed how historians can use sources to formulate arguments and challenge the existing disposition. This in turn, showed the discipline of History is not content-loaded but calls for analytic skills.

In phenomenological hermeneutics, the task is to return to the experience and grasp its meaning. For me, the essence of this journey was the recognition that teaching history is not about transmitting facts—it is about fostering historical consciousness, empathy, and critical thinking through lived engagement (Van Manen, 2016). Using non-fiction as a pedagogical tool allowed me to reframe History as a discipline centred on human experience rather than memorisation. Grounded in the constructivist paradigm of grounded theory, I witnessed how this learner—through inquiry, discussion, and reflection—moved from disinterest to critical engagement. Therefore, the new pedagogical tool affirmed the power of narrative to disrupt fixed mindsets and foster a deeper appreciation of historical knowledge (Foster, 2018). Yet, this journey also left me with questions. How scalable is this approach? Would it resonate with other learners? The limitations of my single-case research remain, but phenomenology teaches us to value the particular (Jackson, 2021). In this process of learner transformation, I realised that introducing innovative pedagogical tools is practical for arousing interest among disengaged learners. However, the effectiveness is deeply contextual and varies across learners. This classroom research again reinforces the importance of embracing a phenomenological perspective in education. VanManen's phenomenological hermeneutic approach allowed me to reflect on what happened in the classroom and what it meant. At its best, teaching is an act of presence—to the learner, the subject, and the moment. Through this experience, teaching history means opening dialogue with the learners by exposing them to various historical sources so that they understand the historical events and learn about the methodologies and sources.

By dwelling on this lived experience—interpreting it slowly and thoughtfully—I have learned that real teaching occurs not in the content we deliver but in the relationships, we nurture, the spaces we create, and the stories we tell. In this way, teaching History becomes an act of hope: connecting the past to the present and learner to learner in the pursuit of meaning (Brown, 2018). According to Polit and Beck (2010), generalisation is an act of reasoning that involves forming conclusions from particular instances; in the case of qualitative research, the issue of generalisation is less discussed, and grounded theory is often criticised for having generalisability. However, in this classroom research, the disadvantages and the cautions of eminent scholars about the grounded theory are not ignored. Instead, with one learner, it has been a challenge to overcome the methodological error, and taking up the non-fiction historical work as a pedagogical tool was done along with the controlled data collection process to avoid pitfalls. Pre-

mature closure is another intense criticism against using grounded theory (Wilson and Hutchinson, 2013). Though in this classroom research, this introduction of a new pedagogical tool has been used for a single lesson, it is not indicative of any 'pre-mature closure'. Still, it indicates that to engage disinterested learners in any discipline, a teacher should always search for innovative tools to make the lesson enjoyable and ensure that the learners are introduced to any discipline's philosophical foundations and methodological approaches.

After analysing my single learners' responses, I found that the theory proposed cannot be sidelined because this kind of research opens new avenues of research, navigating new pedagogical tools meant for disengaged learners applicable to any discipline. Grounded theory can be used in this classroom as a springboard if a larger, more diverse cohort is considered. The relevance of this research lies in the fact that it affirms that narrative-driven pedagogical tools not only help to reach the immediate learning outcome (in this case, understanding the varied historical sources) but also stretch it to the holistic level where complex emotional quotients like empathy, critical inquiry, and historical consciousness can be cultivated among disengaged learners. It also clearly points out that we as educators often delve too much into making our learners understand the intricacies of the content related to any discipline, taking them away from the disciplinary worldview. Thus, through this non-fiction, facts about the Second World War were made available to the learner, and how this particular event was reconstructed through a multitude of sources gave deeper insights to my learner. Herein lies the importance of this kind of research, which finds relevance for teaching History and any discipline. Therefore, through the interplay of grounded theory based on the relativist ontological stance and Manen's reflective model, meaning construction became the core of this classroom research where the educator and the learner became partners in the process of meaning-making, the former reinterpreted the essence of teaching and redefined the formative assessment process and ventured beyond the suggested learning outcome. At the same time, the latter, through exposure to historical sources, was brought closer to the philosophical underpinnings of the discipline – a crucial step towards agentic learning. What was experienced after introducing this pedagogical tool was that my learner though initially hesitated to go through the literary work but soon developed connectivity with the piece. After reading the literary piece, he did a good job when asked to pen down the features of the era. It needs to be mentioned here that before the beginning of the lesson, I suggested he not go through the chapter in the textbook. After completing the task, I congratulated him, which boosted his confidence, and asked him to find similarities between his write-up and the overall gist of the chapter. This was a critical incident in this journey because he understood how historians construct before us using sources; he made a similar approach and completed the assignment. Therefore, it can be claimed that the learning outcome was achieved, which is reflected in the responses of my learner and later through deeper conversation after the task where he was asked to write an argumentative essay.

With the relativist stance taken in this classroom research, the significance of this study cannot be overlooked as it underscores the uniqueness of every individual learner, suggesting that no human phenomenon can be fully comprehended if placed within the confinement of cohort-driven sampling. The findings of this classroom-based study pointed to implications for future research. Firstly, this approach of using non-fiction narrative not only holds promise for engaging learners but invites educators to reconceptualise History teaching, taking it out from the shell of traditional learning, transcending the teaching-learning experience beyond delivery content, making it dialogic and rooted in

lived experience and critical inquiry. It also triggers essential questions related to designing the curriculum and textbook writing, where providing a glimpse of the pertinent primary sources before introducing any lesson is critical. Finally, in the light of the grounded theory and Manen's reflective cycle, it became clear that a nuanced and deeply reflective account of a single learner's journey has offered essential insights into how History, or any discipline for that matter, can be taught by the process of critical inquiry. For the discipline of History, it becomes clear that when my learner was exposed to a primary source, his skills related to source interpretation and contextualisation developed, but the result may vary. However, the strength of innovative pedagogical tools cannot be denied for any discipline or cohort as they redefine the teaching-learning process. This kind of classroom research can be applied to other disciplines and calls for reformulating the textbooks, shifting from inclusion of dry facts to embedding excerpts from primary sources and relevant non-fiction to arouse curiosity and making the teaching – learning process more engaging.

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